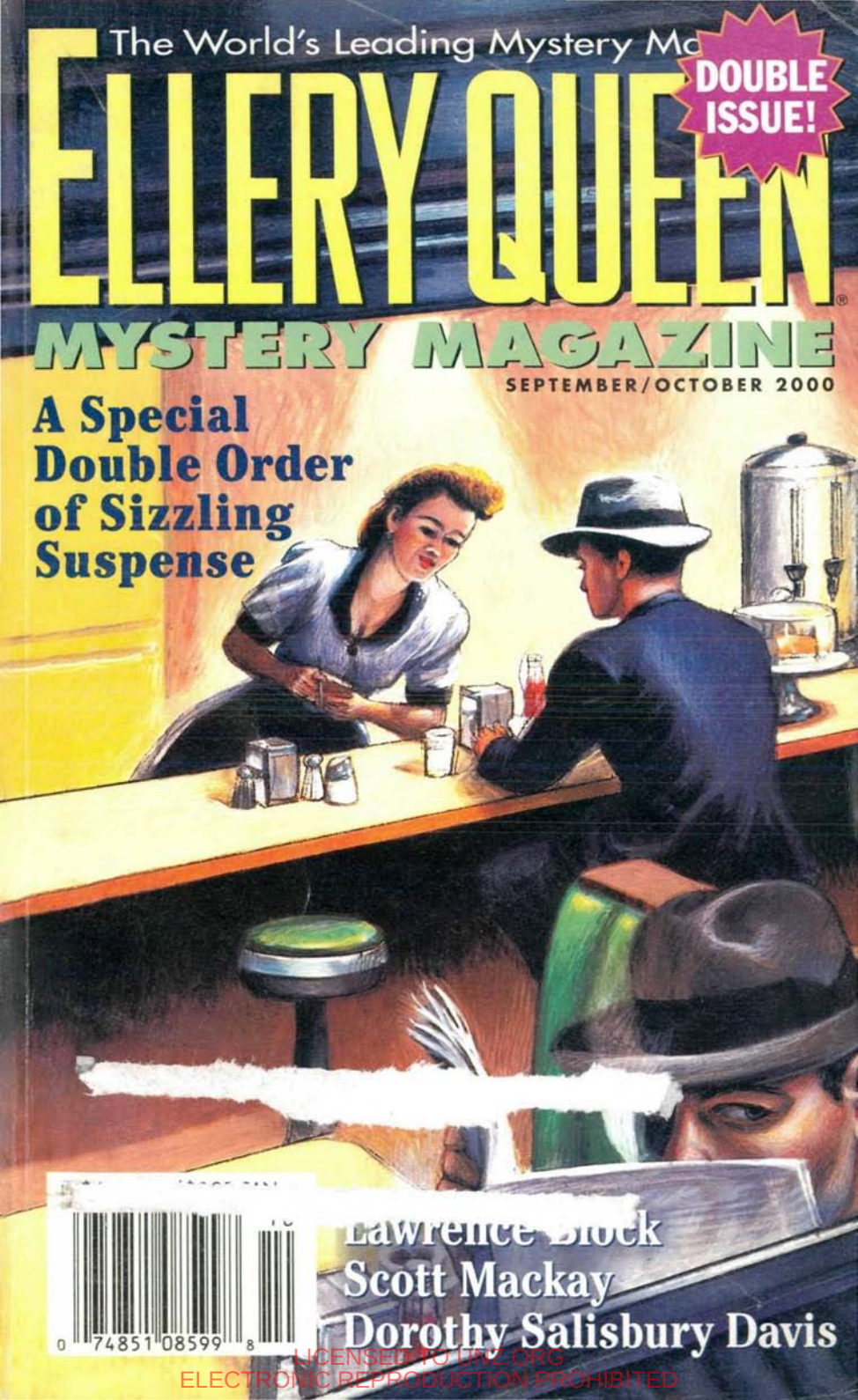

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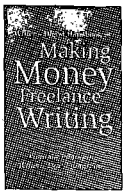

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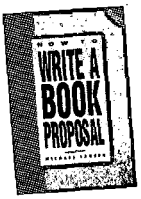

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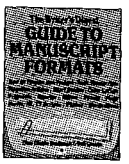

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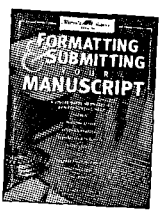

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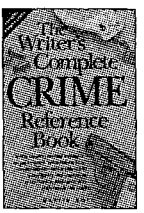

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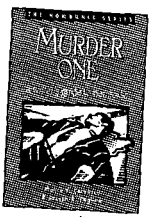

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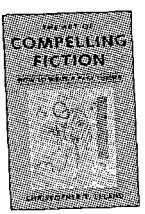

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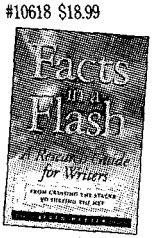

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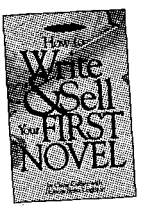

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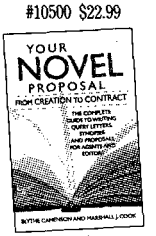

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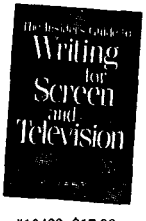

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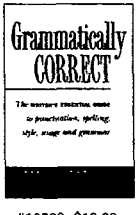

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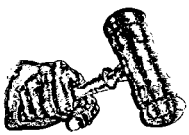

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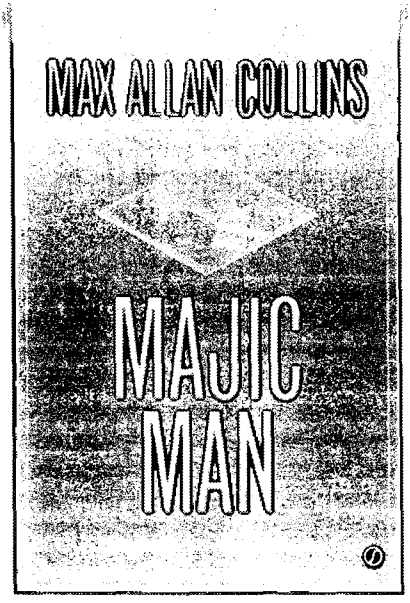

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Murder in a Time of Siege

by Marjorie Eccles

Yorkshire-born novelist and short story writer Marjorie Eccles has a new book coming out in the U.S. next month. *The Superintendent's Daughter* (St. Martin's Press) features Ms. Eccles's long-running series character, Police Superintendent Gil Mayo, the hero of more than a dozen previous novels. Her new short story for *EQMM* is a nonseries work set in 1899, during the Boer War. †

They would soon be reduced to eating the horses. The idea was anathema to any Britisher. They would do it, if it was a question of survival, but thank God it hadn't come to that, not yet.

The small township in the middle of nowhere lay sweltering on the unending, sun-scorched expanse of the African veldt. A hitherto pleasant, orderly, and uneventful place, now seething with fifteen hundred defending troops, surrounded by the enemy, Mafeking had suddenly found itself turned into a garrison by virtue of its strategic position on the borderland railway.

The first actions of the Boers had been to cut through the telegraph wires, tear up two miles of railway, and seize the waterworks outside the redoubts—though as to this last, they might have saved themselves the trouble: There remained an ample supply of water within the town from tanks, and wells drilled through the rock. Three months of siege had followed, yet morale stayed resolutely high. Though the bombardment had been heavy, loss of life and the numbers of wounded had been comparatively light so far, mostly confined to the military in their storming parties against the enemy. Relief was expected daily, but was not yet forthcoming. Belts were tightened further, while the overall commander, Colonel Baden-Powell, the idol and hero of the hour, con-

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tinued to keep General Cronjé and his Afrikaners busy, driving them back with his cavalry sorties and causing them considerable losses. His indefatigable, cheery confidence was immensely heartening to the beleaguered townsfolk. Better than a pint of dry champagne any day, good old B.P.!

Undeterred, the Boers celebrated the first day of the new century by shelling the women's laager. Fortunately, only one person was slightly injured.

Then, on the ninety-ninth day of the siege, Edward Carradine was arrested for murder.

"Mafeking, upon the hundredth day of siege, sends loyal devotion to your Majesty and assurances of continued resolve to maintain your Majesty's supremacy in this town."

Having despatched his doughty telegram to his queen, via a trooper valiant enough to risk breaking through the enemy lines and riding with it to Pretoria, Mr. Frank Whiteley, the mayor of Mafeking, forsook his bicycle for once and made his way on foot down the main street. The town lay baking under the dry wind; red, gritty dust puffed out from under his boots at every step. An upright man with a clear and steady gaze, he was deeply tanned by his many years under the suns of Africa, thinner than he had been, by reason of the privations to which they had all been subjected in recent months here in Mafeking. He had followed the business of an Interior trader and hunter, in partnership with a brother-in-law in Bulawayo, since he was seventeen, and no one was better acquainted with the territories and people of Bechuanaland and the country north of the Limpopo than he. He loved and understood Africa and the African people almost as much as he honoured England and the English. His hard years in this land had made him a man of foresight and courage. But at the moment, he was also a man beset by worries: the great loss to him of his company stores, recently reduced to rubble by heavy shelling, his business already in decline because of the war, the longing for his absent wife and children, the continuing need to eke out food supplies. The responsibility—entirely his—of looking after five hundred women, children, and nuns in the women's laager. And not least, the troubling business of Edward Carradine, an all-consuming anxiety which almost eclipsed all the rest.

Carradine! That unfortunate young man who had arrived in Mafeking with such high hopes and was even now languishing in a makeshift gaol until he could be moved to prison in Pretoria.

Although he was of a good family, his people English immigrants who had interests in the diamond industry in Kimberley, and it was understood that he would, in time, come into a not inconsiderable inheritance, Edward Carradine was of that new

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breed which needed to prove that they could make their own way in the world, a young man of independence who had chosen railway engineering as his special field. Due to this, he had been called to Mafeking to work on the Bechuanaland Railway. On the outbreak of hostilities, he had immediately leaped, with characteristic enthusiasm and impetuosity, into the foray as a volunteer fighter in the amateur army, four hundred of them native Africans, who augmented the forces drawn from the ranks of the British South Africa police and the five-hundred-strong force of Colonel Hore's irregular cavalry. Since the township was bursting at the seams with police, the mayor should have felt able to leave Edward Carradine to them, despite their somewhat backward methods of detection, but he could not. It was a damnable business, but he could not simply wash his hands of this rash young man, a friend, a fellow-Britisher, tiresome and foolhardy though he had turned out to be.

Nor could he push the problem aside in his homeward progress; at every step he was greeted by friends and acquaintances wanting to discuss Carradine and the whys and wherefores of his incarceration. And when eventually he thought he had spoken to the very last of them, coming towards him was that prince of good fellows, Baden-Powell himself, but having other things on his mind, thank God, than Carradine. "Never fear, Frank," he greeted the mayor, "we shall win through, come what may, and no small thanks to you and your calmness in the face of adversity. We are fortunate indeed in having such a stout fellow to maintain and support us in our efforts!"

Frank was uneasy with such compliments. A man of action, he preferred deeds to words. He was a notable game-shot and had had desperate adventures, had escaped being trampled by a rogue elephant and had saved a companion from a rhinoceros by great personal daring, and still his only comment on being congratulated on his bravery had been: "It was to be done, and I did it."

He waved the flies away and sought an answer now as B.P. clasped his shoulder and made further congratulatory remarks on his capable administration.

"I said at the beginning I would sit tight and keep my hair on, and that's all I have done," he replied at last with a smile, taking off his hat and wiping his face with a bandanna.

The mayor's noble brow, compensated for by his luxuriant, drooping moustache, attested to the fact that this was not to be taken literally, and the twinkle in B.P.'s eye showed he appreciated the joke. "That's the ticket! It'll take more than brother Boer to prevent we Britishers from holding aloft the flag, eh? *Nil desperandum*, Frank, *nil desperandum* has always been my motto!" And with the parting shot that Lord Roberts had promised relief

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within a few weeks and he had therefore placed the garrison on full rations again, the intrepid commander went on his way down the street, whistling and cheerful as though he had no cares in the world.

Frank accepted most of these last comments with reservations, having more knowledge of the stubbornness of the Boer character than most of the British commanders. He had the greatest admiration for Baden-Powell's leadership qualities, but it was with growing alarm that he thought of the colonel's last rash statement, relative to his own rapidly dwindling stores of provisions, hitherto so carefully husbanded. When the events of war began moving to a crisis, he had foreseen the strong possibility that Mafeking might fall under siege, and its people be forced to capitulate, not to the Boers, but to starvation. Planning for survival was second nature to him and, prepared for the worst, he had collected enormous stores of staple foods and medical supplies. The resulting diet was monotonous, to be sure, with no fresh meat other than that obtained through forages by the soldiery into the local African villages—something which the mayor strongly deplored. But it was a diet which kept hunger at bay. It was in no small part due to his native Yorkshire prudence that the story of the resistance of the gallant little garrison, which had not been expected to last out a month, had already become the stuff of legend back home in England.

If he had been vouchsafed the knowledge that Mafeking's ordeal had but reached the halfway mark, he would have been even less sanguine.

Leaving behind the cricket ground and the racecourse, a now ruined hotel, and several private houses turned into hospitals, he approached his own residence, about a mile distant. This was a smart bungalow with a pitched, gabled roof, surrounded by trees, a low wall, and iron railings, with a striped awning to keep out the sun, and draped lace curtains at the windows. The most English home, the most hospitable rendezvous for British friends in Mafeking. At the corner of the garden, the flagpole defiantly flew the Union Jack. It was in this house, at one of Sarah's "at homes," that Edward Carradine had first met Kitty Rampling.

With this sombre reminder of happier times in his mind, he entered his now cheerless house, empty of all but servants, for Sarah, his wife, and his little boy and girl were six thousand miles away, at home in England. But safe from the perils of war and starvation, thank God.

Sarah had not wanted to return home. She had stayed with him throughout all the anxious period when peace hung in the balance, while the gathering clouds of war began to darken the sky and many other women fled. "My place, as your wife, is surely

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here, by your side!" she declared, willing to enroll herself in the band of women who, rather than seek the safety of Capetown, had elected to stay and nurse the sick and wounded. Duties at which she would no doubt have excelled, as she did in most things. During the eight years they had been married, Sarah had proved herself to be everything a man could want in a wife: handsome, smiling and good-humoured, a woman of cultivated tastes and true Yorkshire grit. He counted himself a lucky man.

"Do you not think, my dearest," he had answered in a low voice, "that you would not be the greatest support and comfort to me, the best friend a man might have at his side at such a time? But I should be a lesser man had I so little regard for your safety—or the safety of our children."

It was only this last persuasion which had induced her to travel with the children the nine hundred miles to Capetown, on the last train before the line was blown up, and thence to take ship for the long journey to England. Now, her piano stayed as a silent reminder of her presence, the inexorable dry dust of the plains which insinuated itself everywhere collecting upon its keys, her books gathered more dust as they stood unopened on the shelves, her sketchbook and watercolours were put away, her sewing laid aside. Only her precious garden remained as she would have wished it. Frank tended it himself and would not leave it to the African boys. He missed her as a man might miss his right arm, but he had no regrets as to his decision.

How was he to answer her when he wrote to her about Edward Carradine?

Carradine had been a favourite of Sarah's, a popular adjunct to Mafeking society, agreeable, amusing, and clever, if too outspoken in his extraordinary opinions, which he was wont to state with no little vehemence and less tact, and with no expectation in the world of being disbelieved. He had lately aired his view, for instance, after one glass of wine too many at Frank's table, that it was a barbarity to hunt the ostrich and the elephant, not pausing to reflect that this happened to be the basis of Frank's livelihood. Ostrich feathers for fans, boas, and hats, and for debutantes to wear in their hair. Elephant ivory for piano keys, billiard balls, oriental casings, and jewellery, for every decorative use that could be imagined. His was a luxury trade which had made him, if not rich, then comfortably off.

"With respect, sir," Carradine had continued heatedly, "you do not realize the significance of what you are doing! Mark my words, these magnificent animals will one day be hunted to extinction and disappear from the face of the earth! You hunters resemble the ostrich you hunt—you run away and hide your heads in the sand!"

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Frank had managed to conceal his anger and lighten the embarrassment at this rash and ill-considered statement—for Africa was vast, the bounty of her wildlife inexhaustible, was it not? Culling was necessary to keep the elephant population down, to preserve the trees and vegetation they destroyed. He made some humourous remark about the ugly, bald, and manifestly unmagnificent ostrich which occasioned smiles and passed the moment off. He would not take issue with one who was a guest in his house, and who, moreover, despite his brashness, was for the most part a very likeable fellow. His greatest fault lay in his youth, which time would overcome. His heart was in the right place. And to do him justice, Carradine had later apologized.

It was Sarah who had warned Frank of what was happening between Carradine and Mrs. Rampling, and the gossip it was causing. A certain coolness was always evinced by the female section of the community towards this lady, if not by their husbands, but it was impossible for someone of Sarah's warmhearted and generous nature to follow suit, and she had been at special pains to be agreeable to her.

Kitty Rampling was pretty, lively, engaging, and thirty-five if she was a day. She had made an unfortunate and apparently disappointing marriage. Her husband, George, was considerably older than she was, a brute of a man, a sullen individual with a great propensity for quarrelling, one with whom Carradine, for one, had recently had a violent argument. He was said to owe money all around the town—as he certainly did to the mayor. Too busy, it was rumoured in the racecourse bar, drinking and losing on the horses what money remained to him to be any more suspicious of his wife's affair with the handsome railway engineer than he had been of countless others. She held him in the hollow of her cool little hand—or under her thumb, depending on which way you regarded Kitty Rampling. She was small and feminine, wore pretty frocks rather than the fashionable, mannish coats and skirts, the shirtwaists and the ties which the other ladies favoured at the moment, and had huge, innocent brown eyes.

Foolish and infatuated as Edward Carradine might be, however, Frank could not believe that he was the sort of man to shoot another, and in the back, too.

There was no getting away from the circumstances, unfortunately. He had been discovered one evening outside the Rampling bungalow, kneeling over the man's body, blood on his hands. It was popularly supposed that Rampling had come home unexpectedly and discovered Carradine and his wife *in flagrante delicto,* and a furtherance of their quarrel had ensued, though why the shooting had occurred in the street remained a mystery. Nor had the gun ever been found.

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Carradine denied he had been with Mrs. Rampling. His story, not necessarily believed, was that he had been walking homewards along the street when a shot had rung out and the man walking in front of him had collapsed. He had run forward, discovered the injured man to be Rampling, and supported him in his arms, only to find him already dead. It was thus that the next man on the scene, the mayor, who had been working late and was bumping homewards on his bicycle, awkwardly carrying a Gladstone bag full of papers, came round the corner and found him.

His arrival was followed in but a few moments by others, including the ever-present police. Everyone was shocked; no one had liked Rampling and no one wanted to believe in young Carradine's guilt, and it was at once suggested that Rampling had been killed by some sniper's bullet, regardless of the fact that the scene of the shooting was almost in the centre of the town. Other equally baseless suggestions followed—that one of Rampling's creditors had come after him, or, with more support, that due to the inadvisability of arming the natives, one of them had run amok. Or maybe drunken soldiers had been involved: The troops were not all disciplined regulars, and unruly incidents were not uncommon. However, Carradine's presence outside the Rampling bungalow, the gossip about his association with Kitty Rampling, together with that recent angry clash in the racecourse bar between himself and her husband, witnessed by many, made him a prime suspect.

The mayor, sitting in his empty house, could find no answer to his own pressing problem of what was to be done about the matter.

The siege continued, Mafeking still miraculously holding out after more than six months. But the fortified trenches encircling the town were not proof against Cronjé's onslaughts, and casualties grew, despite the warning horn blown from the lookout whenever the Boers' twelve-pounders were being loaded. Small acts of heroism and courage were reported daily among the loyalist civilians, the women and children, the native servants. The townspeople buried their dead and at last began to eat the horses.

However, with the letters and despatches which still got through came news to stiffen the sinews—that Ladysmith, another beleaguered town, an important railway junction in Natal, had been relieved after a hundred and twenty days. It was reported that the Boers were losing heart. It was also reported, once again, that relief troops were within five miles of Mafeking, and B. P. promptly earmarked several more horses for a celebration dinner for the whole town, cheerfully urging everyone to bolster their courage, reminding them that their sacrifices for Queen and country would not be in vain. The relief

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forces, unfortunately, were driven back with heavy losses.

Mrs. Rampling, recovered from her prostration at the death of her husband, had refused to move out of her house into the women's laager and stayed where she was, retrimming her pretty hats and entertaining off-duty officers at afternoon soirees. She had grown noticeably thinner, her skin was transparent, but it only enhanced her looks and increased the lustre of her big brown eyes.

Carradine was still imprisoned, half-forgotten in the troubles of the moment and allowed no visitors, and the mayor was looking, and feeling, ever more anxious. Problems other than the exigencies of the moment weighed heavily on his mind. Carradine had once accused him of burying his head in the sand, but he knew he could not do so forever.

He thought of his last letter from Sarah, and felt worse. "If Colonel Baden-Powell is the most popular man in England—as there is no doubt he is," she had written, "then the most popular man here in all Yorkshire is the mayor of Mafeking. News of his courage and the tireless work he is doing there has travelled across the continents and has made his wife and children very proud."

What would she think of him now, if she knew?

The Bechuanaland dusks were short, the nights cold, and after cycling briskly home one evening, shaken by what he had heard that morning, the mayor was promising himself a tot of carefully hoarded brandy before the scanty meal—dried biltong again, no doubt, which was all his servant would be able to provide—as he walked into his sitting room.

There he found Edward Carradine, sitting in his own favourite chair in an attitude of great melancholy, twisting round and round in his hands an object which had previously been standing on one of the small tables in the room—an ostrich egg mounted upon ebony and painted with a charming, delicate depiction of flowers of the veldt. He was regarding it intently. Perhaps his time in prison had taught him to abandon his scruples in regard to ostriches.

Frank's greeting could not have been more heartfelt. "Carradine, how extremely glad I am to see you!"

Carradine was very pale from his incarceration, his ruddy good looks diminished, with lines drawn about his mouth. Frank looked at him with pity and saw that he had lost his youth. "They have let me go, Frank," he said. "I had become nothing more than an embarrassment to them; they had to release me."

"I have never doubted they would do so, my dear fellow—in fact, I have expected it daily! I have spared nothing in arguing with the officer in charge for your release, given him every assurance that a man of your character could have done no such thing!"

Carradine maintained silence at this until finally he said, "There is still no trace of the weapon, and they inform me they

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have better things to do at the moment than to search for it. So there is nothing to prove my guilt, and she—Mrs. Rampling—supports my story that I was not with her that night." An inscrutable expression crossed his face. "She even submitted to her house being searched, but of course no gun was found there. No doubt some unknown native with a grudge against Rampling will be the convenient scapegoat," he finished bitterly.

"The scapegoat?"

Carradine did not answer the question, looking down at the ostrich egg once more. "*She* painted this, did she not?" he remarked at last.

Frank regarded him gravely. "Mrs. Rampling did indeed, and gave it to my wife on the occasion of her birthday. She is not untalented in that direction."

"In other directions, too."

The pretty trifle in Carradine's hands trembled. Frank reached out and removed it from him.

Suddenly, the young man sprang up, almost knocking over the lamp on the table beside him. "We must talk—but outside! I have for some reason developed a strange aversion to being inside four walls!" He laughed harshly and strode to the door.

Frank followed him into the cold dusk. The light was fading fast and the sky was the colour of the brandy Frank had been denied, shot with rose and gold, the garden smelling of the jasmine Sarah had planted around the door. He sank onto a seat, which held warmth from the heat of the day, under the jacaranda tree, while Carradine paced about. Suddenly, he turned and faced the mayor.

"I did not fire that shot, Frank."

Frank moved the toe of his boot about in the red earth, deflecting a column of ants. He moved his toe away and the ants regrouped themselves and went on. He busied himself with his pipe. In the light of the match, a column of fireflies whirled. The rich aroma of tobacco overpowered the scent of the jasmine.

"I know that for an indisputable fact, Edward."

Carradine stood very still and upright, his hands clasped behind his back, looking down at the mayor. "Do you, Frank?" he said at last. "Do you, indeed?"

Frank saw the young man struggling to come to terms with something which he now recognized, and perhaps had subconsciously known all along. "It was not I who shot him either, my young friend."

"Then who?"

The sound of the lookout horn suddenly rang out from the redoubts, echoing throughout the town, signalling that the Boers were mustering for another bombardment, a warning to take cover while there was still time. A distant noise and confusion

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broke out as the townspeople ran for shelter, obeying the edict that civilians were to stay indoors as far as possible during an attack so as not to hamper the trained volunteers, competent to deal with such a situation. Hooves clattered down the street, wagon wheels rumbled, a few shouts were heard, but presently the ominous waiting silence they had all become accustomed to fell, the lull before the shelling and retaliatory mortar fire began. The interruption might have been a mere rumble of thunder for all the attention the two men paid to it.

"If I did not shoot him, and you did not, then who did?" Carradine repeated tensely. "If—" He could not go on.

Frank decided to help him. "It was the blue diamond that started it, was it not?"

Carradine started. "How in the world do you know of that?"

"My wife had the story of it from Mrs. Rampling herself. I fear," he said carefully, looking directly at the young man, "that the lady is one of some—acquisitiveness. Sarah told me how you had procured the diamond for her—"

"How I did so in the hopes that it would buy her love, though I knew I could never marry her?" Carradine was suddenly in a passion. "How I beggared myself to procure it? No, I wager she would not have told Mrs. Whiteley that! I was—infatuated, there is no other word for it, I have had time to come to my senses and see that, at least. Infatuation that I thought was love. Through my brother's good offices, I was able to obtain the diamond at a fair price, though its value was still staggering and it cost me all I possessed in the world, and though my expectations for the future are not nearly as high as many suppose." Carradine came to a wretched halt and then said, "I see I must tell you everything. . . . Between us, we may arrive at the truth."

Frank, who already knew the truth, said nothing, looking at the brilliant stars pricking the darkening sky. Every sound was exaggerated in the expectant stillness, the shrill of the cicadas, the croo-crooing of sleepy doves, a shouted command from the defences.

Carradine sank onto the seat beside Frank. "She knew I had bought the diamond. I had had it set into a ring for her, but it took me some months to pluck up enough courage to put it on her finger, with all that such an extravagant gesture implied. Though there could have been no marriage between us, our friendship had not yet reached . . . " He faltered, a deep and painful flush mantling his pale cheek. "However, she had given me to understand that, on that very evening, she would accept the ring from me, and thereafter our relations would be somewhat different. She allowed me to put it on her finger before we dined. Rampling came home unexpectedly, just as we had finished our meal. He was drunk, but not so drunk that he did not immediately see how it

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was between us. He burst into a vile stream of abuse and Kitty became very—excited, I think, is the only word which will serve." Carradine passed a hand across his brow. "How can I explain this? Her husband's abuse did not appear to distress her—indeed, those big eyes of hers softened and sparkled, colour came to her cheeks when he actually raised his hand to her—it was almost as though—as though she was *enjoying* it! As if there was some strange complicity between them . . . Maybe, even, a kind of love. I think I began to see my folly, how I had been deceived, even then."

The desperate young man buried his face in his hands. When he raised his head, his face was wet with tears. "Nevertheless, I squared up to Rampling. I could scarcely tell him to get out of his own house, but I warned him that he must not lay a finger on his wife. Whereupon, he laughed insolently and swaggered outside. "Are you going to leave it at that, Edward?" she asked. "No, by God, I am not," said I, and rushed out after him, intending to knock the fellow down. But, stumbling in the darkness, I had not reached him before . . . before the shot rang out and he fell down dead. And that, I swear, is the truth of what happened."

Into the silence erupted the loud crump of the first mortar shell, followed by another. A horse whickered in fright, and the night became hideous with noise and flames. Within the little garden, Edward Carradine sat as though turned to stone. "How could I have been such a fool? Seen with hindsight, it is so obvious—Rampling coming home, apparently unexpectedly, finding me in intimate circumstances with his wife, strutting out like that. . . . Either she had arranged matters so, or she seized her chance. In any case, she had estimated my nature well. She knew I would go after him, prompted by her." He said, his voice hard and dry as pebbles, "She would have shot me, like a dog—"

"Had you not stumbled. By the merest chance, or Divine intervention, just as the fatal shot was being fired. So that the wrong man received the bullet."

"She would have shot me," Carradine repeated bleakly. "In God's name, why?"

"For love of money, Edward. For this." From his pocket, Frank pulled forth a small soft leather pouch and from that withdrew the costly blue diamond ring, its radiance undimmed in the starlit darkness. "For greed, the life of one young man less important than the glitter of a diamond she could not resist. . . ." He had no need to add that, having obtained the diamond, she had had no more use for Carradine. "An ugly thought, is it not?"

"Supposing I had indeed been the victim? Rampling would have been the first to be suspected."

"I believe he had prudently bought himself an alibi."

"And what of the revolver—what did she do with it?"

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"There is a well, not six yards away."

"But beyond where Rampling fell. She did not pass me, Frank."

Frank saw again the moonlit street as he had come upon it—Carradine kneeling over the dead man, the revolver lying between the young man and the Ramplings' door, heard again the running feet which heralded the arrival of others on the scene in moments. What else could he have done but conceal the weapon in his Gladstone bag? A pity he could not have swallowed it, he had thought afterwards, as the ostrich swallows large stones, bricks, or even chunks of metal to aid the process of digestion in its gizzard. It had lain on his conscience just as heavily ever since.

"She threw the gun towards me, purposely to incriminate me. And you picked it up, did you not? Frank, I owe you my life."

Frank did not say that it was Sarah to whom Carradine owed his life, prompting him as if she had been beside him, telling him that this man could not be capable of murder. "I could not let an innocent man hang," he said, and added words he had used once before, "It was to be done, and I did it."

Yet he had paid for his action with the sleepless nights which had followed. For the first time in his life, he had trifled with the law, and the burden of it had been heavy.

Until he had remembered the story Sarah had told him, of the blue diamond.

He held the sparkling jewel out once more to Carradine, but Carradine shrank from it as though it had been a snake. "She may keep it, for all I care!"

"Don't be a fool, Edward. It is yours by right."

"How did you come by it?"

"She asked me to return it to you."

Carradine laughed bitterly. "Once I might have believed that!"

"It is true. When I saw that gun lying there on the ground, I picked it up with scarcely a thought, but when I took it out of the bag, at home, I recognized it as one I myself had sold to Rampling twelve months ago. It was one of several I wished to dispose of, and he insisted on taking it on trial. If he was satisfied with its performance, he would pay me—which, I might add, he never did! When I recognized what was once mine, I took it to Mrs. Rampling and confronted her with it. Our conversation was—interesting. She subsequently asked me to return the diamond to you."

"In exchange for your silence? Am I expected to believe that?"

Frank said gravely, "There was no need to ask for it."

"I don't understand! Why did you not take the gun to the police when you knew to whom it belonged? I would have been released immediately! Instead, a guilty woman has gone free! You call that justice?"

Justice was a slippery notion, as Frank had discovered since com-

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ing to this land, not as clear-cut and unequivocal as it seemed in Britain. Sometimes, the Africans did it better. "Free? I think not."

He had known native tribesmen who had decided to die, and did so. Through shame or dishonour, loss of face. Had the knowledge that she had accidentally shot the husband she had in some curious way loved worked upon Kitty Rampling so that she had lost the will to live? Maybe that was too fanciful, but he could not forget his meeting with her three months ago—that hectic flush on her cheekbones, the cough, the feverish brightness of her eyes. The loss of spirit, the fun of playing dangerous games at last over for her. "She was ill, very ill, Edward. She knew that she had not long to live."

"What? Kitty?" Carradine sat in stunned disbelief, his complexion becoming, if possible, even paler than before. Then he leaped up, all that he had suffered on her account instantly forgiven. "I must go to her!"

Frank placed a hand on his arm. "Too late, my friend, too late. She died this morning."

With a groan, Carradine sank back, covering his eyes with his hand.

Frank had obtained her written confession, on his promise that he would wait until after her death before handing it over. He had immediately done so that morning, after hearing the news that she had died. His action in retaining the gun had not been viewed very gravely by the chief of police—who had, after all, himself known and been entranced by Mrs. Rampling—it had been humanely prompted, he thought, and in any case, without her admission, her guilt or otherwise would have been difficult to establish. The authorities would have been bound to release Carradine after a time, and it was his opinion that the spell in gaol cooling his heels had done the hot-headed young fellow no harm at all, rubbed a few corners off, in fact.

The shelling had stopped. There would be no more that night. People were emerging from shelter, and a growing noise and confusion travelled across the night, from perhaps a mile away. Carradine raised himself, and the two men walked out of the garden and stood looking out across the darkness, lit by flames soaring skywards. Not a house remained standing in the street where Kitty Rampling had lived. A pall of smoke rose like a funeral pyre over the area of flattened buildings. A Red Cross ambulance could be distinguished standing by.

Mafeking's siege was nearing its end. Victory or capitulation, one of them must come soon. Its story was played out.

"Come," said Carradine, beginning to walk rapidly down the road, "let us see what we can do to help." ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

LET'S GET LOST

by Lawrence Block

When the phone call came I was parked in front of the television set in the front room, nursing a glass of bourbon and watching the Yankees. It's funny what you remember and what you don't. I remember that Thurman Munson had just hit a long foul that missed being a home run by no more than a foot, but I don't remember who they were playing, or even what kind of a season they had that year.

I remember that the bourbon was J. W. Dant, and that I was drinking it on the rocks, but of course I would remember that. I always remembered what I was drinking, though I didn't always remember why.

The boys had stayed up to watch the opening innings with me, but tomorrow was a school day, and Anita took them upstairs and tucked them in while I freshened my drink and sat down again. The ice was mostly melted by the time Munson hit his long foul, and I was still shaking my head at that when the phone rang. I let it ring, and Anita answered it and came in to tell me it was for me. Somebody's secretary, she said.

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I picked up the phone, and a woman's voice, crisply professional, said, "Mr. Scudder, I'm calling for Mr. Alan Herdig of Herdig and Crowell."

"I see," I said, and listened while she elaborated, and estimated just how much time it would take me to get to their offices. I hung up and made a face.

"You have to go in?"

I nodded. "It's about time we had a break in this one," I said. "I don't expect to get much sleep tonight, and I've got a court appearance tomorrow morning."

"I'll get you a clean shirt. Sit down. You've got time to finish your drink, don't you?"

I always had time for that.

The novels and stories in Lawrence Block's Matthew Scudder series include some of the master crime writer's best work. In this new entry in the series, Mr. Block takes us way back in time, as Scudder reflects on an incident that occurred when he was still a New York cop. Readers hungry for a new Block novel will find a second book about Keller—"the urban lonely guy of assassins," as his creator sees him—in bookstores in October (see *Hit List;* William Morrow).

Years ago, this was. Nixon was president, a couple of years into his first term. I was a detective with the NYPD, attached to the sixth precinct in Greenwich Village. I had a house on Long Island with two cars in the garage, a Ford wagon for Anita and a beat-up Plymouth Valiant for me.

Traffic was light on the LIE, and I didn't pay much attention to the speed limit. I didn't know many cops who did. Nobody ever ticketed a brother officer. I made good time, and it must have been somewhere around a quarter to ten when I left the car at a bus stop on First Avenue. I had a card on the dashboard that would keep me safe from tickets and tow trucks.

The best thing about enforcing the laws is that you don't have to pay a lot of attention to them yourself.

Her doorman rang upstairs to announce me, and she met me at the door with a drink. I don't remember what she was wearing, but I'm sure she looked good in it. She always did.

She said, "I would never call you at home. But it's business."

"Yours or mine?"

"Maybe both. I got a call from a client. A Madison Avenue guy, maybe an agency vice president. Suits from Tripler's, season tickets for the Rangers, house in Connecticut."

"And?"

"And didn't I say something about knowing a cop? Because he

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and some friends were having a friendly card game and something happened to one of them."

"Something happened? Something happens to a friend of yours, you take him to a hospital. Or was it too late for that?"

"He didn't say, but that's what I heard. It sounds to me as though somebody had an accident and they need somebody to make it disappear."

"And you thought of me."

"Well," she said.

She'd thought of me before, in a similar connection. Another client of hers, a Wall Street warrior, had had a heart attack in her bed one afternoon. Most men will tell you that's how they want to go, and perhaps it's as good a way as any, but it's not all that convenient for the people who have to clean up after them, especially when the bed in question belongs to some working girl.

When the equivalent happens in the heroin trade, it's good PR. One junkie checks out with an overdose and the first thing all his buddies want to know is where did he get the stuff and how can they cop some themselves. Because, hey, it must be good, right? A hooker, on the other hand, has less to gain from being listed as cause of death. And I suppose she felt a professional responsibility, if you want to call it that, to spare the guy and his family embarrassment. So I made him disappear, and left him fully dressed in an alley down in the financial district. I called it in anonymously and went back to her apartment to claim my reward.

"I've got the address," she said now. "Do you want to have a look? Or should I tell them I couldn't reach you?"

I kissed her, and we clung to each other for a long moment. When I came up for air I said, "It'd be a lie."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Telling them you couldn't reach me. You can always reach me."

"You're a sweetie."

"You better give me that address," I said.

I retrieved my car from the bus stop and left it in another one a dozen or so blocks uptown. The address I was looking for was a brownstone in the East Sixties. A shop with handbags and briefcases in the window occupied the storefront, flanked by a travel agent and a men's clothier. There were four doorbells in the vestibule, and I rang the third one and heard the intercom activated, but didn't hear anyone say anything. I was reaching to ring a second time when the buzzer sounded. I pushed the door open and walked up three flights of carpeted stairs.

Out of habit, I stood to the side when I knocked. I didn't really

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expect a bullet, and what came through the door was a voice, pitched low, asking who was there.

"Police," I said. "I understand you've got a situation here."

There was a pause. Then a voice—maybe the same one, maybe not—said, "I don't understand. Has there been a complaint, officer?"

They wanted a cop, but not just any cop. "My name's Scudder," I said. "Elaine Mardell said you could use some help."

The lock turned and the door opened. Two men were standing there, dressed for the office in dark suits and white shirts and ties. I looked past them and saw two more men, one in a suit, the other in gray slacks and a blue blazer. They looked to be in their early to mid forties, which made them ten to fifteen years older than me.

I was what, thirty-two that year? Something like that.

"Come on in," one of them said. "Careful."

I didn't know what I was supposed to be careful of, but found out when I gave the door a shove and it stopped after a few inches. There was a body on the floor, a man, curled on his side. One arm was flung up over his head, the other bent at his side, the hand inches from the handle of the knife. It was an easy-open stiletto and it was buried hilt-deep in his chest.

I pushed the door shut and knelt down for a close look at him, and heard the bolt turn as one of them locked the door.

The dead man was around their age, and had been similarly dressed until he took off his suit jacket and loosened his tie. His hair was a little longer than theirs, perhaps because he was losing hair on the crown and wanted to conceal the bald spot. Everyone tries that, and it never works.

I didn't feel for a pulse. A touch of his forehead established that he was too cold to have one. And I hadn't really needed to touch him to know that he was dead. Hell, I knew that much before I parked the car.

Still, I took some time looking him over. Without looking up, I asked what had happened. There was a pause while they decided who would reply, and then the same man who'd questioned me through the closed door said, "We don't really know."

"You came home and found him here?"

"Hardly that. We were playing a few hands of poker, the five of us. Then the doorbell rang and Phil went to see who it was."

I nodded at the dead man. "That's Phil there?"

Someone said it was. "He'd folded already," the man in the blazer added.

"And the rest of you fellows were still in the middle of a hand."

"That's right."

"So he—Phil?"

"Yes, Phil."

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"Phil went to the door while you finished the hand."

"Yes."

"And?"

"And we didn't really see what happened," one of the suits said.

"We were in the middle of a hand," another explained, "and you can't really see much from where we were sitting."

"At the card table," I said.

"That's right."

The table was set up at the far end of the living room. It was a poker table, with a green baize top and wells for chips and glasses. I walked over and looked at it.

"Seats eight," I said.

"Yes."

"But there were only the five of you. Or were there other players as well?"

"No, just the five of us."

"The four of you and Phil."

"Yes."

"And Phil was clear across the room answering the door, and one or two of you would have had your backs to it, and all four of you would have been more interested in the way the hand was going than who was at the door." They nodded along, pleased at my ability to grasp all this. "But you must have heard something that made you look up."

"Yes," the blazer said. "Phil cried out."

"What did he say?"

"'No!' or 'Stop!' or something like that. That got our attention, and we got out of our chairs and looked over there, but I don't think any of us got a look at the guy."

"The guy who . . ."

"Stabbed Phil."

"He must have been out the door before you had a chance to look at him."

"Yes."

"And pulled the door shut after him."

"Or Phil pushed it shut while he was falling."

I said, "Stuck out a hand to break his fall . . ."

"Right."

"And the door swung shut, and he went right on falling."

"Right."

I retraced my steps to the spot where the body lay. It was a nice apartment, I noted, spacious and comfortably furnished. It felt like a bachelor's full-time residence, not a married commuter's *pied-à-terre.* There were books on the bookshelves, framed prints on the walls, logs in the fireplace. Opposite the fireplace, a two-by-

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three throw rug looked out of place atop a large Oriental carpet. I had a hunch I knew what it was doing there.

But I walked past it and knelt down next to the corpse. "Stabbed in the heart," I noted. "Death must have been instantaneous, or the next thing to it. I don't suppose he had any last words."

"No."

"He crumpled up and hit the floor and never moved."

"That's right."

I got to my feet. "Must have been a shock."

"A terrible shock."

"How come you didn't call it in?"

"Call it in?"

"Call the police," I said. "Or an ambulance, get him to a hospital."

"A hospital couldn't do him any good," the blazer said. "I mean, you could tell he was dead."

"No pulse, no breathing."

"Right."

"Still, you must have known you're supposed to call the cops when something like this happens."

"Yes, of course."

"But you didn't."

They looked at each other. It might have been interesting to see what they came up with, but I made it easy for them.

"You must have been scared," I said.

"Well, of course."

"Guy goes to answer the door and the next thing you know he's dead on the floor. That's got to be an upsetting experience, especially taking into account that you don't know who killed him or why. Or do you have an idea?"

They didn't.

"I don't suppose this is Phil's apartment."

"No."

Of course not. If it was, they'd have long since gone their separate ways.

"Must be yours," I told the blazer, and enjoyed it when his eyes widened. He allowed that it was, and asked how I knew. I didn't tell him he was the one man in the room without a wedding ring, or that I figured he'd changed from a business suit to slightly more casual clothes on his return home, while the others were still wearing what they'd worn to the office that morning. I just muttered something about policemen developing certain instincts, and let him think I was a genius.

I asked if any of them had known Phil very well, and wasn't sur-

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prised to learn that they hadn't. He was a friend of a friend of a friend, someone said, and did something on Wall Street.

"So he wasn't a regular at the table."

"No."

"This wasn't his first time, was it?"

"His second," somebody said.

"First time was last week?"

"No, two weeks ago. He didn't play last week."

"Two weeks ago. How'd he do?"

Elaborate shrugs. The consensus seemed to be that he might have won a few dollars, but nobody had paid much attention.

"And this evening?"

"I think he was about even. If he was ahead it couldn't have been more than a few dollars."

"What kind of stakes do you play for?"

"It's a friendly game. One-two-five in stud games. In draw, it's two dollars before the draw, five after."

"So you can win or lose what, a couple of hundred?"

"That would be a big loss."

"Or a big win," I said.

"Well, yes. Either way."

I knelt down next to the corpse and patted him down. Cards in his wallet identified him as Philip I. Ryman, with an address in Teaneck.

"Lived in Jersey," I said. "And you say he worked on Wall Street?"

"Somewhere downtown."

I picked up his left hand. His watch was Rolex, and I suppose it must have been a real one; this was before the profusion of fakes. He had what looked like a wedding band on the appropriate finger, but I saw that it was in fact a large silver or white-gold ring that had gotten turned around, so that the large part was on the palm side of his hand. It looked like an unfinished signet ring, waiting for an initial to be carved into its gleaming surface.

I straightened up. "Well," I said, "I'd say it's a good thing you called me."

"There are a couple of problems," I told them. "A couple of things that could pop up like a red flag for a responding officer or a medical examiner."

"Like . . ."

"Like the knife," I said. "Phil opened the door and the killer stabbed him once and left, was out the door and down the stairs before the body hit the carpet."

"Maybe not that fast," one of them said, "but it was pretty quick. Before we knew what had happened, certainly."

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"I appreciate that," I said, "but the thing is, it's an unusual MO. The killer didn't take time to make sure his victim was dead, and you can't take that for granted when you stick a knife in someone. And he left the knife in the wound."

"He wouldn't do that?"

"Well, it might be traced to him. All he has to do to avoid that chance is take it away with him. Besides, it's a weapon. Suppose someone comes chasing after him? He might need that knife again."

"Maybe he panicked."

"Maybe he did," I agreed. "There's another thing, and a medical examiner would notice this if a reporting officer didn't. The body's been moved."

Interesting the way their eyes jumped all over the place. They looked at each other, they looked at me, they looked at Phil on the floor.

"Blood pools in a corpse," I said. "Lividity's the word they use for it. It looks to me as though Phil fell forward and wound up face downward. He probably fell against the door as it was closing, and slid down and wound up on his face. So you couldn't get the door open, and you needed to, so eventually you moved him."

Eyes darted. The host, the one in the blazer, said, "We knew you'd have to come in."

"Right."

"And we couldn't have him lying against the door."

"Of course not," I agreed. "But all of that's going to be hard to explain. You didn't call the cops right away, and you did move the body. They'll have some questions for you."

"Maybe you could give us an idea what questions to expect."

"I might be able to do better than that," I said. "It's irregular, and I probably shouldn't, but I'm going to suggest an action we can take."

"Oh?"

"I'm going to suggest we stage something," I said. "As it stands, Phil was stabbed to death by an unknown person who escaped without anybody getting a look at him. He may never turn up, and if he doesn't, the cops are going to look hard at the four of you."

"Jesus," somebody said.

"It would be a lot easier on everybody," I said, "if Phil's death was an accident."

"An accident?"

"I don't know if Phil has a sheet or not," I said. "He looks vaguely familiar to me, but lots of people do. He's got a gambler's face, even in death, the kind of face you expect to see in an OTB parlor. He may have worked on Wall Street, it's possible, because cheating at cards isn't necessarily a full-time job."

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"Cheating at cards?"

"That would be my guess. His ring's a mirror; turned around, it gives him a peek at what's coming off the bottom of the deck. It's just one way to cheat, and he probably had thirty or forty others. You think of this as a social event, a once-a-week friendly game, a five-dollar limit and, what, three raises maximum? The wins and losses pretty much average out over the course of a year, and nobody ever gets hurt too bad. Is that about right?"

"Yes."

"So you wouldn't expect to attract a mechanic, a card cheat, but he's not looking for the high rollers, he's looking for a game just like yours, where it's all good friends and nobody's got reason to get suspicious, and he can pick up two or three hundred dollars in a couple of hours without running any risks. I'm sure you're all decent poker players, but would you think to look for bottom dealing or a cold deck? Would you know if somebody was dealing seconds, even if you saw it in slow motion?"

"Probably not."

"Phil was probably doing a little cheating," I went on, "and that's probably what he did two weeks ago, and nobody spotted him. But he evidently crossed someone else somewhere along the line. Maybe he pulled the same tricks in a bigger game, or maybe he was just sleeping in the wrong bed, but someone knew he was coming here, turned up after the game was going, and rang the bell. He would have come in and called Phil out, but he didn't have to, because Phil answered the door."

"And the guy had a knife."

"Right," I said. "That's how it was, but it's another way an investigating officer might get confused. How did the guy know Phil was going to come to the door? Most times the host opens the door, and the rest of the time it's only one chance in five it'll be Phil. Would the guy be ready, knife in hand? And would Phil just open up without making sure who it was?"

I held up a hand. "I know, that's how it happened. But I think it might be worth your while to stage a more plausible scenario, something a lot easier for the cops to come to terms with. Suppose we forget the intruder. Suppose the story we tell is that Phil was cheating at cards and someone called him on it. Maybe some strong words were said and threats were exchanged. Phil went into his pocket and came out with a knife."

"That's . . ."

"You're going to say it's farfetched," I said, "but he'd probably have some sort of weapon on him, something to intimidate anyone who did catch him cheating. He pulls the knife and you react. Say you turn the table over on him. The whole thing goes crashing to the floor and he winds up sticking his own knife in his chest."

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I walked across the room. "We'll have to move the table," I went on. "There's not really room for that sort of struggle where you've got it set up, but suppose it was right in the middle of the room, under the light fixture? Actually that would be a logical place for it." I bent down, picked up the throw rug, tossed it aside. "You'd move the rug if you had the table here." I bent down, poked at a stain. "Looks like somebody had a nosebleed, and fairly recently, or you'd have had the carpet cleaned by now. That can fit right in, come to think of it. Phil wouldn't have bled much from a stab wound to the heart, but there'd have been a little blood loss, and I didn't spot any blood at all where the body's lying now. If we put him in the right spot, they'll most likely assume it's his blood, and it might even turn out to be the same blood type. I mean, there are only so many blood types, right?"

I looked at them one by one. "I think it'll work," I said. "To sweeten it, we'll tell them you're friends of mine. I play in this game now and then, although I wasn't here when Phil was. And when the accident happened the first thing you thought of was to call me, and that's why there was a delay reporting the incident. You'd reported it to me, and I was on my way here, and you figured that was enough." I stopped for breath, took a moment to look each of them in the eye. "We'll want things arranged just right," I went on, "and it'll be a good idea to spread a little cash around. But I think this one'll go into the books as accidental death."

"They must have thought you were a genius," Elaine said.

"Or an idiot savant," I said. "Here I was, telling them to fake exactly what had in fact happened. At the beginning I think they may have thought I was blundering into an unwitting reconstruction of the incident, but by the end they probably figured out that I knew where I was going."

"But you never spelled it out."

"No, we maintained the fiction that some intruder stuck the knife in Ryman, and we were tampering with the evidence."

"When actually you were restoring it. What tipped you off?"

"The body blocking the door. The lividity pattern was wrong, but I was suspicious even before I confirmed that. It's just too cute, a body positioned where it'll keep a door from opening. And the table was in the wrong place, and the little rug had to be covering something, or why else would it be where it was? So I pictured the room the right way, and then everything sort of filled in. But it didn't take a genius. Any cop would have seen some wrong things, and he'd have asked a few hard questions, and the four of them would have caved in."

"And then what? Murder indictments?"

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"Most likely, but they're respectable businessmen and the deceased was a scumbag, so they'd have been up on manslaughter charges and probably would have pleaded to a lesser charge. Still, a verdict of accidental death saves them a lot of aggravation."

"And that's what really happened?"

"I can't see any of those men packing a switch knife, or pulling it at a card table. Nor does it seem likely they could have taken it away from Ryman and killed him with it. I think he went ass over teakettle with the table coming down on top of him and maybe one or two of the guys falling on top of the table. And he was still holding the knife, and he stuck it in his own chest."

"And the cops who responded—"

"Well, I called it in for them, so I more or less selected the responding officers. I picked guys you can work with."

"And worked with them."

"Everybody came out okay," I said. "I collected a few dollars from the four players, and I laid off some of it where it would do the most good."

"Just to smooth things out."

"That's right."

"But you didn't lay off all of it."

"No," I said, "not quite all of it. Give me your hand. Here."

"What's this?"

"A finder's fee."

"Three hundred dollars?"

"Ten percent," I said.

"Gee," she said. "I didn't expect anything."

"What do you do when somebody gives you money?"

"I say thank you," she said, "and I put it someplace safe. This is great. You get them to tell the truth, and everybody gets paid. Do you have to go back to Syosset right away? Because Chet Baker's at Mikell's tonight."

"We could go hear him," I said, "and then we could come back here. I told Anita I'd probably have to stay over."

"Oh, goodie," she said. "Do you suppose he'll sing 'Let's Get Lost?'"

"I wouldn't be surprised," I said. "Not if you ask him nice."

I don't remember if he sang it or not, but I heard it again just the other day on the radio. He'd ended abruptly, that aging boy with the sweet voice and sweeter horn. He went out a hotel-room window somewhere in Europe, and most people figured he'd had help. He'd crossed up a lot of people along the way and always got away with it, but then that's usually the way it works. You dodge all the bullets but the last one.

"Let's Get Lost." I heard the song, and not twenty-four hours

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later I picked up the *Times* and read an obit for a commodities trader named P. Gordon Fawcett, who'd succumbed to prostate cancer. The name rang a bell, but it took me hours to place it. He was the guy in the blazer, the man in whose apartment Phil Ryman stabbed himself.

Funny how things work out. It wasn't too long after that poker game that another incident precipitated my departure from the NYPD, and from my marriage. Elaine and I lost track of each other, and caught up with each other some years down the line, by which time I'd found a way to live without drinking. So we get lost and found—and now we're married. Who'd have guessed?

My life's vastly different these days, but I can imagine being called in on just that sort of emergency—a man dead on the carpet, a knife in his chest, in the company of four poker players who only wish he'd disappear. As I said, my life's different, and I suppose I'm different myself. So I'd almost certainly handle it differently now, and what I'd probably do is call it in immediately and let the cops deal with it.

Still, I always liked the way that one worked out. I walked in on a cover-up, and what I did was cover up the cover-up. And in the process I wound up with the truth. Or an approximation of it, at least, and isn't that as much as you can expect to get? Isn't that enough? ●

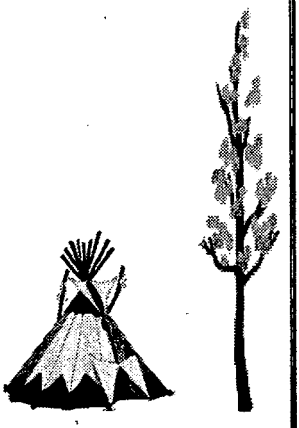
DETECTIVERSE

A Missunderstanding

by Naomi

With apologies to Longfellow

By the shining big sea water
Stood the Mighty Chieftain's wigwam
Stood a birch tree tall and slender
Stood his trusty bow and arrow
Stood his tomahawk so shiny
Stood the chieftain's lovely daughter
Stood his daughter Laughing Water
Stood his daughter's little boy child
Stood his daughter softly weeping
Stood the angry Mighty Chieftain
Taking aim with bow and arrow
Felling Grandson's fleeing father
No one blamed the Mighty Chieftain
All his people underSTOOD



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Season of the Camel

by Eward D. Hoch

Last month we had the pleasure of announcing the forthcoming publication of a new collection of Nick Velvet short stories (*The Velvet Touch*/ Crippen & Landru). We have since learned that the TV option on the character, which has been in place for several years now, is to be renewed. Velvet is generally held to be Mr. Hoch's most popular series character, but former secret agent Jeffrey Rand, this tale's hero, also has high ratings with *EQMM*. ¶

It was on one of Rand's occasional visits to Egypt with his wife Leila that he first encountered Omar Goncah, a designer of computer chips who traded in Oriental rugs in his spare time. He was a slender, well-spoken man who informed them early on that he'd been educated in England.

"King's College, Cambridge," he said smoothly, upon learning that Leila lectured in archaeology at the University of Reading. "I regret not returning to your country more frequently, but my affairs keep me in the Middle East." They'd met at a dinner party in Alexandria, arranged by Leila's cousin on the eve of their departure from the city.

"We're planning a cruise up the Nile," Rand explained in response to Omar Goncah's question. "Egypt is a good place to spend part of the winter, away from gloomy England."

The slender man smiled. "I know a better place. Come with me to the camel fights in Turkey."

"The what?" Leila asked. "Certainly you must be joking."

"No, no! I am very serious. There is a big one on Sunday in Selçuk, in western Turkey. I fly to Istanbul tomorrow noon. They are like bullfights in Spain, although the camels are rarely injured."

Rand and Leila thought no more of it at the time, but lying in bed that night she suddenly asked him, "What do you think about going to the camel fights?"

"It's not what we planned."

"But isn't that half the fun of being retired and on holiday? You can do what you want, and so can I!"

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"Camel fights in Turkey? Do you really think there are such things?"

"Let's find out."

It took them an hour to make the necessary changes in their itinerary, but by midmorning Saturday they had tickets on the noon flight to Istanbul. Their new friend Omar was surprised to see them at the gate but immediately took them in hand, even arranging to sit with them on the two-hour flight. Rand suddenly found himself on a first-name basis with the man.

"Tell me, Jeffrey, what line of work were you in before you retired?" he asked as their plane dipped its wings over the Mediterranean.

"I was a civil servant. It was very dull."

Omar Goncah shrugged. "Sometimes selling carpets can be dull too."

"But aren't they valuable?" Leila asked impishly. "Don't they all fly?"

"Ah, but if they were flying carpets would I be paying for this airfare, dear lady? In truth, though, I do have a flying carpet. It is in the baggage compartment right now, flying to Istanbul with us."

"You're planning to sell it there?" Leila asked.

"No, I will award it as a prize in one of the camel fights. Traditionally, carpets are awarded to the winning owners, but they are usually cheap, machine-made products. This one carries some slight value because of its fine workmanship."

"An advertisement for your business," Rand said.

"Of course, of course. I have learned the ways of the world."

They landed on schedule at Istanbul's airport, where the air was crisp with a January chill and Omar had arranged for a hired car to take them the rest of the way to the camel fights at Selçuk. "Where is that?" Leila inquired.

"Three hundred and eighty miles south of here. A good driver can make it in five hours, so we should reach the village by sundown."

"I didn't realize it would be so far," Rand's wife said, and he recognized in her tone the first rumblings of regret that she'd persuaded him to make this trip into the unknown.

The hired car was a German-built limousine with a trunk large enough to hold Omar's rolled-up carpet. The three of them fit easily into the backseat, leaving the driver alone up front. His name was Aytekin, and he seemed to speak some English, exchanging a few words with Omar before they started out. "I told him to take the shortest route," their new friend said. "Perhaps upon our return we can go the more leisurely way and stop at the archeological site of Homer's Troy. They have a huge replica of the famous Trojan Horse at the museum there."

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"I'd like to see Troy," Leila agreed. "It would be something to tell my next class."

The drive took them through mountain passes and along wooded hillsides. Occasionally they would come upon another car or even a bus, but for the most part the area between villages seemed all but deserted. "This doesn't look like camel country," Rand remarked.

"The best grazing lands are nearer the coast. Many of the people here are nomads who farm mountainside pastures during the growing season. They use camels as beasts of burden, but the fighting camels do no work. And they only fight during the winter months, which is their mating season."

Suddenly the limousine swerved sharply, bumping across the grassy shoulder. Rand saw at once that the road ahead was blocked by several vehicles, one of them a police car. Omar and the driver were out of the limo at once, with Omar shouting in English at a uniformed officer. "Fool, you need signs or flashing lights! My driver almost ran into you on this curve!"

The officer placed his hands on his wide leather belt and came over to them. "A man has been killed here," he replied in English, gesturing toward the hulk of a burned-out car. "It was a car bomb with a timer attached. You can pull around us on the grass and get back on the highway."

"What is this?" Omar asked the driver. "Are there terrorists even here?"

"Everywhere," came the reply as their driver maneuvered around the obstructions. "Kurds."

Rand couldn't help noticing the license plate on the burned-out vehicle. "That's a diplomatic license."

Omar nodded agreement. "Driving down to the camel fights is a popular weekend outing for the diplomatic corps. It was probably someone from Ankara or Istanbul."

"That's a terrible way to die," Leila remarked.

"The Kurds are a problem here?" Rand asked.

"Not usually in this area, but if the bomb was planted hours ago, it was probably done at an embassy or consulate."

They drove along the winding road in silence for a time, until they reached a crossroads and overtook a battered truck carrying a camel in the back. Two ropes around its neck secured the large beast, looking so incongruous in the truck. There was a muzzle over its mouth. "A fighting camel," Omar Goncah observed, "on its way to Selçuk, no doubt. They are muzzled so they can't bite each other."

"The poor things," Leila said. "I detest all staged fighting between animals."

"They are hardly ever injured," Goncah assured her as they passed the truck. "They crash into each other with much pushing and shoving. When one is pushed to the ground or runs away, the

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other is the winner of the match. That driver is Jobar, one of the best trainers of fighting camels."

"I suppose there is betting on the outcome," Rand said.

"Of course, but these people are not wealthy. It is merely a winter diversion for them."

After another hour's drive they came to the village of Selçuk, a small outpost of the country's Asian heritage, close to the Aegean Sea. Omar had arranged for rooms at a small inn. It was a two-story house with many windows, built of wood on a stone ground floor. An outside stairway led from a courtyard to the second-floor rooms.

They were greeted by the innkeeper, a black-bearded man named Sevret who wore a traditional red fez. Rand realized it was the first one he'd seen since their arrival in the country. At one time it had been the country's national headdress. "Greetings," the bearded man said, bowing slightly to Omar Goncah and then shaking his hand. "I have two rooms at the top of the stairs. Your party is here for tomorrow's camel fights?"

"That's correct," Omar responded. He glanced around. "Are we the only guests?"

"Most people come by car or bus, just for the day. But I am expecting another, a man from the Greek consulate in Istanbul."

Rand and Omar exchanged glances. "We passed a fatal accident on the highway about an hour north of here," Omar told him. "The car had diplomatic license plates."

"Ah! I pray it was not Mr. Berk." He emphasized the words by placing his palms together in prayer. "But you have arrived in time for dinner, and I invite you to join my wife and me on the first floor when you have had time to freshen up."

Rand glanced back at the car, where the driver was unloading their bags and Omar's carpet from the trunk. Omar called out to him in Turkish and the rolled carpet was returned to the trunk. "It's safer there," he told Rand. "Aytekin will call for us in the morning and drive us to the camel fights."

"He's not staying here?"

"There are friends in the village." He smiled. "A woman, I think."

The innkeeper's wife proved to be a charming half-English woman named Beth who was an excellent cook. She and Leila became instant friends, discussing their mixed heritage, and after dinner they helped clean up together while Beth's husband supplied cigars for the men. Rand demurred, but Omar lit one with their host. He leaned back in his chair as if still at the dinner party in Alexandria where Rand and his wife had first met him.

"This is so relaxing," he told the innkeeper. "But Mr. Berk has not yet appeared. I fear it may have been him in that accident we passed."

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"That would be unfortunate," Sevret told them. "He was to take part in the ceremonies."

"Perhaps I can fill in," Omar suggested. "I have a carpet in the trunk of our hired car. It has some value, and I plan to offer it as a prize."

Sevret nodded slowly. "That would be most kind of you, Mr. Goncah. My wife and I have been working all day at food preparation and there has been little time to plan the ceremonies, informal as they are."

Rand and Leila retired early, and in the morning they were awakened by the sound of buses passing in front of the inn. When Omar joined them he commented on the sunshine. "This is perfect weather for a camel fight, with the temperature in the forties. Sunny days are rare here in January."

Beth Sevret brought them breakfast and stayed to chat. "The buses come each Sunday during the fighting season, bringing thousands of fans from other villages. It is good for our business. There is a makeshift arena a few miles down the road and the fans set up picnic tables. When the fighting starts they watch from the surrounding hillsides. They have most of their own food, but they always need extra salads or kebabs or yogurt. And, of course, they need raki. It is the national drink here, very potent. Sevret and I will be at the fights to fill all their needs."

"Do you have any trouble with Kurds?" Rand asked her.

"Kurds? Not in this part of the country. They are in the eastern regions."

The hired limousine arrived shortly after they'd finished breakfast. Rand noticed Omar checking the trunk to make certain his carpet was still there. Then they set off down the road, following a line of buses.

They parked in a field near the arena, some distance from where the buses were lined up. The arena was a large circle formed by a roll of metal fencing, and a curly-haired Turk wearing a padded woolen vest was leading a suitably adorned camel into the enclosure as they approached. "Mehmet!" Omar called out. "It is good to see you again."

The man leading the camel turned and smiled. "Omar Goncah! Do you have a carpet for us today?"

"Don't I always bring one, my friend?" They embraced, and Omar took a closer look at the camel. Rand was impressed by the size of the beast, made even larger by colorful padding, mirrored blankets, bells, and pompoms. "They often weigh a ton or more," Omar told him, as if reading the question in Rand's mind.

Leila was also impressed. "We don't grow them this bulky back in Egypt."

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"Their owners treat them well. There is great prestige in owning a good fighting camel."

"All this to win a carpet?"

"The owners are paid about two hundred dollars for entering each competition, but that hardly covers the cost of raising and transporting the animal. It is the sport that is important. Mehmet's family has trained fighting camels for more than a century. He carries on the tradition when he is not working at his government job."

Omar instructed his driver to bring the carpet from the trunk of the car and hang it over the fence for all to see. The camel owners clustered around, enthralled. Rather than the machine-made carpets Rand and Leila could see on display, this was an intricate hand-woven square creation with what appeared to Rand to be a geometric tree-of-life design, complete with birds. "It goes to the winner of the last fight," Omar announced, and his words were immediately translated for those who spoke no English.

Rand and Leila wandered among the crowd, watching as they ate and drank in preparation for the day's events. Rand noticed that many families had brought a carpet with them, and when the Sevrets arrived he asked Beth about it. "In earlier times, carpets lined the insides of tents for the nomadic people," she explained. "When the tribes converted to Islam they acquired a new function as prayer rugs. They are an important part of life here."

Finally it was time for the first fight. An announcer with a portable public-address system said something in Turkish and the spectators cheered as two bulky camels were led into the arena. Rand observed last-minute bets being made all around. Then the owners brought them closer, face-to-face, and moved quickly out of the way. "Sometimes a camel will bolt at this moment," Omar explained, joining them on the hillside above the arena. "If he runs away, he forfeits the match."

But neither of these beasts showed any reluctance to fight. After hesitating for only a moment, they slammed into each other with the force of two locomotives, each pushing and shoving to gain the advantage. The owners, in their padded vests, stood nearby, ready to move in if necessary. Cheers went up from the crowd. The announcer grew more excited. Then, within minutes, one of the camels was pushed to the ground and the fight was over. The losing owner ran out to examine his animal while the winner was paraded around the arena in triumph. The announcer presented the winning owner with a pale green carpet whose pattern was hardly a thing of beauty.

Leila purchased some food from Sevret and his wife, and she and Rand settled down with Omar for a snack before the next fight. "Do these go on all afternoon?" she asked him.

"It depends on the number of entries. The animals are pampered

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and fight only once a week, about twelve times in a season. Usually there are at least eight fights here at Selçuk, sometimes more."

It was about this time, as the camels for the second fight were being led into the arena, that a van from the Turkish police pulled off the road and parked at the foot of the hill. Two men in suits and topcoats emerged, accompanied by a pair of uniformed officers. They waited near the announcer until the second fight came to an end, after about ten minutes, and then one of the men took the microphone for an announcement. He said it first in Turkish and then repeated it in English. "We are seeking anyone who might have come here from Istanbul yesterday, especially anyone who might be acquainted with Rolf Thadder, a press attaché at the Norwegian consulate. Mr. Thadder was killed in a highway accident yesterday on his way here. Please raise your hands if you traveled from Istanbul yesterday afternoon."

Some of the spectators exchanged glances, but none raised their hands until Rand and Leila did. Then Omar followed suit, and one of the camel owners did so too. Rand recognized Jobar, the truck driver they'd passed on the road. The government police fanned out, one man coming to Leila and him, one to Omar, and one to the camel owner. The fourth officer walked over to speak with Sevret and his wife.

"You saw the accident?" the detective asked Rand, but it was Leila who answered.

"We saw the aftermath. The officer at the scene said it had been a car bomb with a timer."

"That is correct. What are your names, please?"

"Jeffrey Rand. This is my wife, Leila."

The detective nodded, taking a notebook from his coat pocket. "I am Captain Iznik. I believe I have a report on you, Mr. Rand. Were you not director of British Intelligence for a time?"

Rand smiled. "Hardly! I headed up the Concealed Communications unit, but that was several years ago."

Iznik frowned and jotted something in his notebook. Rand wondered where the detective had obtained the information on him, but before he could ask, Iznik said, "We've established that the dead man, Rolf Thadder, had some sort of business to transact here today. He removed a quantity of money from the consulate safe before starting out yesterday morning. It's not entirely clear whether the use of this money was authorized."

"You mean he stole it."

"He may have meant to return it, but the embassy reported the theft to the police and asked us to be on the lookout for him. One of his coworkers mentioned a Greek named Berk whom he'd been seen with recently."

Berk. The name was familiar, but for a moment Rand couldn't

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remember where he'd heard it before. Then it came to him. Berk was the man from the Greek consulate whom Sevret and his wife had been expecting, the one they'd feared might have been the victim of the car bombing. Apparently it hadn't been Berk but a Norwegian named Thadder. But if that was the case, what had happened to Berk?

The police questioning was continuing in a low-key manner, but Rand could see the next set of camels being led into the makeshift arena. As they clashed, the roar from the spectators was so great that he didn't catch Captain Iznik's next words. "What was that?"

"I asked if you are here on official business."

"I'm retired, Captain," Rand told him again. "I have no connection with British Intelligence. Why should you think that I do?"

"This is a remote place to come for the dubious pleasures of a camel fight on a Sunday afternoon. Your arrival in Istanbul was noted yesterday. We keep an extensive file on foreign agents."

"You'd better update it. My wife and I met Omar Goncah in Alexandria and he invited us to join him."

"Mr. Goncah? Where is he?"

Rand glanced around. "He was here a few minutes ago. I believe one of your men may be questioning him."

There was some excitement in the arena as one of the camels went down, apparently injured. Several of the spectators rushed forward and for a moment the fallen beast was the center of attention. It had been bitten on the leg when its opponent's muzzle came undone. Rand looked around for Omar but couldn't find him. His driver was up by the car, polishing its hood. Then Rand noticed one of the camel owners near the fence where Goncah's prize carpet was on display. It was his good friend Mehmet, and Rand could have sworn the man took a quick photograph of the carpet with a tiny camera.

The police had concluded their questioning well before the final fight, but they lingered for some food and drink at Beth Sevret's urging. She and her husband had been busy serving an elaborate variety of shish kebab to the spectators, passing the metal skewers to anyone with the purchase price. The government detectives, Rand noticed, ate for free.

"Is this the final battle?" Leila asked, making clear that she was growing tired of the violent spectacle.

"I hope so," Rand agreed. "With all that padding it's like watching sumo wrestlers."

Mehmet led his camel into the arena, and the cheers were the loudest of the afternoon, growing even louder when the rival camel and its owner joined them. Rand recognized Jobar, the man whose truck they'd passed on the trip down from Istanbul. This was truly the main event the crowd had been anticipating. Turk-

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ish pounds changed hands at a rapid rate, often going to middlemen who served as bookmakers.

This fight lasted longer than the others, and it was obvious from the start that the camels were evenly matched. Both owners shouted encouragement, though it was doubtful the beasts could hear or recognize their masters' voices over the roar of the crowd. "Stay here a moment," Rand said to Leila.

"Where are you going?"

"I want to get closer to the action."

He made his way down the hillside, looking for Omar but still not seeing him. He came upon Sevret carrying two skewers of shish kebab, but he had not seen their companion either. "He'll turn up at the end of this fight," the cafe owner promised. "He must present his carpet to the winner."

Rand headed over to the missing man's limousine, but there was no sign of him there. Some scraps of kebab on the ground were the only evidence that anyone had passed this way recently. Behind him he heard a final cheer go up from the crowd and he knew the match must be over. He hurried down to the arena in time to see Omar Goncah lift the carpet off the fence and carry it to the winning owner, not Mehmet, as expected, but his rival, Jobar. Mehmet's camel had bolted from the arena and had to be pursued by the handlers.

Omar said a few words in Turkish and handed over the carpet with great ceremony. That was when Rand realized that the police official, Captain Iznik, was at his elbow. "Mr. Rand, I wonder if you could help us," he said quietly.

"What is it?"

"There's been another murder."

Leila saw him walking away at the officer's side. She came running over and asked, "What is it now?"

"Go back with Omar," he told her. "I'll join you soon."

Iznik led him around the back of the area where the buses were parked. Two of the officers stood guard over the body of a man slumped against the rear tire of a bus. One of the metal shish-kebab skewers had been plunged through his neck. "Do you know him?" the officer asked.

"No," Rand answered honestly. "I don't remember ever seeing him before."

The dead man was middle-aged, wearing a plaid shirt and jacket. He seemed better groomed than the majority of the local farmers, and Rand wondered if he too had come from the city. "We found some identification on him. His name is Plato Berk, an official at the Greek consulate in Istanbul. You may remember the name. I mentioned him earlier as a friend of the man killed by the car bomb."

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"I remember."

"But you didn't meet him? At the inn or elsewhere?"

"No. I believe Mr. Sevret and his wife were expecting him, but he never arrived."

"He arrived," Iznik corrected, "and obviously his killer was aware of it."

"I know nothing about the man," Rand insisted. "Nor about the previous victim."

"Yet both were attached to their governments' consulates in Istanbul. I think we can assume the same person may have killed them, even though the method of murder was different in each case."

"It's a possibility," Rand agreed, his mind racing.

"I do not consider your presence here to be a coincidence, Mr. Rand. Something brought these people together and you know what it was."

"I know nothing. My wife and I came here at the invitation of Omar Goncah."

"We have spoken to Mr. Goncah. A rug merchant, is he not?"

"No, actually he's a—" The words froze in Rand's throat. Suddenly it was all clear to him. "You'll have to excuse me," he said. "Something important's come up!"

He walked quickly away as Captain Iznik called after him. "We're not finished yet, Mr. Rand. Come back here!"

Rand broke into a run. Ahead he could see the spectators still milling about as the camels were being led off to their trucks. Leila was standing with Beth Sevret and he called to them. "Where's Omar? Have you seen him since the last fight?"

"He went up to the car for something," Beth replied.

"Stop running," Leila ordered. "You'll have a heart attack at your age!"

Rand slowed to a trot, feeling his heart racing. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Captain Iznik in pursuit at a slower pace. As soon as the limousine came into view, he saw Omar and their driver in conversation. The slender man smiled and spoke to Rand. "You're just in time. I was speaking to Aytekin about starting back soon. It's a long drive, but I hope we can make a brief stop at Troy so Leila can see it."

Rand's eyes were on the driver, and he saw a pistol snake out from under his coat. "My time is short," the man said in broken English. "I want the chip."

Omar's eyes widened. "I can't believe this."

"You've killed two men for it already," Rand told the driver. "That's enough for one weekend."

Aytekin saw Captain Iznik hurrying across the field toward them. He swung his weapon in that direction and Rand struck out

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at his arm, sending the shot wild. Then he and Omar both grabbed him as Iznik drew his own weapon.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Your killer," Rand told him. "Aytekin set the bomb in Thadder's car in Istanbul and skewered Plato Berk this afternoon."

"What was his motive?"

"A computer chip. Want to tell us about it, Omar?"

Rand and Leila went back to Sevret's inn after the police had finished. Omar came with them as they waited for a replacement driver to take them back to Istanbul. As was often the case, it fell to Rand to fill in the story's missing pieces.

"Omar told us back in Alexandria that he was a designer of computer chips who traded in Oriental rugs in his spare time. He was bringing a carpet here to present as the prize in the final camel fight and asked us to come along. Perhaps he felt that having a staid British couple by his side would hide the true nature of his trip."

"Which was?" Sevret asked.

"To sell his design for a highly advanced computer chip to the highest bidder. Once I remembered his occupation, I knew that had to be the reason. Why else would various governments and their representatives come all the way down here? Why else would Rolf Thadder have removed a quantity of cash from his consulate safe?"

"Why here?" Beth Sevret asked. "Such a deal could have been closed on a street corner in Istanbul."

"I wondered about that myself," Rand admitted. "But then I realized that Omar must have a preferred buyer down here. I remembered the carpet he'd offered as a prize in the final match. It was square, while surely the carpets used as prayer rugs are always rectangular. They must be, because a Muslim kneels on it and prostrates himself during his devotions. Omar's rug was square, and what I'd taken for a geometric tree-of-life design was actually his design for an advanced computer chip."

Omar spoke for the first time. "It was foolish, I suppose, but in my business there is a need for secrecy. I had the carpet hand-woven to my design and carried it with me quite openly. I even felt secure enough to leave it in the trunk of the rented car with a driver I barely knew. A thief would be looking for a tiny chip, not a prayer carpet. And if someone did steal the carpet it would be meaningless to him without a knowledge of its true importance. Since the chip's function involved weapons-launching, I approached a number of smaller governments without the resources to develop such technology themselves. Mehmet's government offered the most, but Berk and Thadder were still in the running. If Thadder stole the money to buy it, he may have been operating independently of his government. It mattered not to me."

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"But how did you know that Omar's driver killed them?" Leila asked Rand.

"We must assume only one killer was involved. Of the few countries that knew about Omar's chip, would more than one resort to assassination rather than paying cash for it? I don't think so. But if the same person killed Thadder and Berk, that meant the killer had to be in Istanbul yesterday to plant the bomb in Thadder's car. The police suspected he might have come here. That was why they asked to interview everyone who drove down from Istanbul yesterday. You'll remember four people raised their hands, the two of us, Omar here, and the truck driver Jobar. The three of us could not have planted the bomb because Aytekin picked us up at the airport and we drove down here at once. Jobar might have planted the bomb, but he couldn't have killed Plato Berk. He had to be with his camel in the arena when Berk was skewered. The same holds true for Mehmet, of course. He had to be near his camel during the fight. The Sevrets here were roaming the grounds, but they couldn't have been in Istanbul to plant the bomb because they were busy here with their food preparation."

"I was near the arena too, to award the prize," Omar reminded them.

"But your driver wasn't. And Aytekin didn't raise his hand when the police asked to question those who'd come from Istanbul yesterday. Why not? Because he was fearful of police questioning. I noticed him earlier, over by his car, polishing it. Later I found discarded food on the ground there. Aytekin recognized Plato Berk in the crowd and went after him, pulling the food from his skewer so he'd have a weapon. The gun would have made too much noise. I imagine Berk drove down this morning, keeping out of sight after what happened to Thadder."

"Would Aytekin have killed Jobar too, for winning the carpet?" Sevret asked.

Rand shook his head. "He never knew about the carpet or he'd have stolen it during the night. He ran out of possible buyers to kill so he had to go after Omar himself, imagining he carried the chip in his pocket."

"Do you?" Leila asked the slender man.

"No, no, it is under lock and key. I brought only the carpet."

"And now the wrong man has won it," she observed. "What will that poor farmer Jobar do with it?"

Rand had an answer for that. "It is not the carpet but the design. Before the last fight I saw Mehmet take a picture of it. I imagine for the money he paid, he decided a camera was more trustworthy than a camel." O

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

CUSTOMER'S CHOICE

by Brendan DuBois

About ten minutes after Clay Wilson backed his van up the gently curving driveway to the large house on the lake, he knew it was going to be a long and dreary day, due to two things.

The first was that when he started unloading his photo gear from the van, the lady of the house—Chrissy Tate—refused to help him. Oh, he wasn't expecting her to hump in the long, heavy cardboard boxes with the tripods and light gear, but it would have been nice if she had been at the door, opening it up for him while he trooped in and out of the home. Instead, after a quick and bubbly handshake and hello, she had gone back to the long granite counter in the well-lit kitchen, where she sipped a tall glass of orange juice and leafed through a thick Ethan Allen furniture catalogue. Even with her back to him, he knew the attitude. He was invisible, he was hired help, he didn't count. And hired help can wrestle with the front door on their own, thank you very much.

The second was what he saw when he got into the wide living room with the floor-to-ceiling windows that boasted a grand view of a thick green lawn that ran down to the lake's edge. Down on

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the black-blue waters was a dock that had a moored powerboat and sailboat bobbing in some slight swells, adjacent to a white-shingled boathouse. In the living room the furniture looked like it had been purchased and placed by five-hundred-dollar-an-hour consultants. The flooring was beige carpeting by the entryway and tan tile by the window, where a brass telescope rested. There was a television set the size of a Buick on the far wall, along with a fully-stocked wet bar and shelves that held knick-knacks, trophies, and photographs, and not a single book.

Then Clay spotted the well-lit artificial Christmas tree near the couch. The dark green tree looked fine, with lots of tinsel and garlands and blinking lights, and around the base was a collection of decorated gifts, complete with ribbons and bows. But it made him stop and take notice, and to know that it was going to be a dreary day.

It was, after all, the second week in June.

Chrissy came over from the kitchen, a big smile on her face, a smile from the customer to the hired help. She had on tight stone-washed jeans, white high-heeled shoes, and a red, sleeveless pullover blouse that was filled out nicely up top. Her arms were quite tanned and the sunlight captured the fine hairs on the back of her arms.

"I see you've noticed my props," she said, giggling. Her teeth were white and perfect, and her blond hair hung back in a simple ponytail. It was the simplest thing in the whole damn house, and when Clay had stepped in, he'd started pricing everything he saw, and knew within ninety seconds there was a million dollars' worth of home here, on a couple million dollars' worth of land, and God knew how many gadgets and such. Hell, the damn place had a three-car garage, and that boathouse by the water was the size of some homes in town.

"You're right, Mrs. Tate, I did notice that," he said, putting down a box of camera gear and accessories. "Is that what you want, a portrait of you and your husband with the Christmas tree in the background?"

She strolled across the living room with the self-confidence of a

After taking a break from his series work to write a "big book," a thriller which imagines how the world might have been different had JFK lived (see *Resurrection Day*), Brendan DuBois is back at work on his Lewis Cole mystery novels. *EQMM* takes pride in the New Hampshire author's accomplishments, for he debuted in our Department of First Stories in 1986, and now writes for many other magazines, including *Playboy*.

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woman who knows she's being watched and doesn't mind it a bit. She sat down on the couch and picked up a leather-bound volume and gestured Clay to come over.

"Please, you can call me Chrissy," she said. "And my husband's name is Jack. He's upstairs in his office, working. Even on a Saturday, he's working, checking on his investments, his stocks. Look, this is what we want for your time and trouble."

He sat down next to her, conscious of his own worn sneakers, his old jeans that had been stained time and time again with darkroom chemicals, and his black long-sleeved turtleneck shirt. It was a warm day but he kept the sleeves down. He always tried to keep the sleeves down.

Chrissy opened the book wide so that one side of it rested on his lap, and Clay was sure that didn't happen by accident. It was a photo album of sorts, with glassine pages holding in postcards. Actually, he noted, looking closer, they were Christmas cards, the ones that show photos of couples or children or happy homes. He saw Chrissy and a tall man with a thick moustache who he supposed was her husband on one page, and another couple, about the same age, on the other. The other woman had bright red hair and the other man was hefty, a guy who looked like he gained lots of pounds sitting behind a desk. Dueling Christmas cards, side by side.

She tapped the other couple's photos with a long red fingernail. "This is Blake Emerson and his wife Terry. Blake and my husband Jack were in the same frat at MIT, and they've been friends ever since. And very competitive friends as well; Blake never lets Jack forget that he was the first to make a million, and that he had the bank and brokerage statements to prove it."

Clay, who had a hard time imagining a hundred thousand dollars, just nodded. "And the competition never lets up. Ever. Whether it's sailing or riding or running, Jack and Blake have to constantly outdo each other." She laughed, very easily, and Clay wondered if orange juice was all that she had been drinking this morning. "It's even gotten to our Christmas cards. Here, let me show you."

She pointed out the first set of cards. "Here, this is when it was easy. Here they are, with a picture in front of the State House. Here we are, a year later, Jack and me, in front of the White House. Here they are, on a Hawaiian beach. Here we are, in the Swiss Alps. There they are, last year, at a base camp below Mount Everest, if you can believe it. Now that one got Jack plenty steamed, I don't mind telling you."

Clay wondered, as he looked over the photos, if there was anything she minded telling him. He had lived in northern New England all of his life and had been to Boston exactly seven times and New York City once. The two couples in the exotic pictures looked

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rich and content and very happy, and even Clay was surprised at how quickly and deeply he now disliked them.

He looked over at the brightly lit tree. "I'm sorry, I still don't get it. You want me to take a Christmas-card photo, and not a portrait?"

She made a production of closing the photo album while the back of her hand brushed his right thigh. "That's right, and we want it to be a . . . um, well, it'll all sound so silly, but we're looking for something . . . unique."

He nodded. He knew what was coming. About ninety-nine point nine percent of his portrait work was straightforward enough. The happy bride and groom uttering low insults to each other while maintaining their wide smiles for the camera's benefit. The proud mom and dad with the newborn who either puked or howled during the studio time. And the ever-popular family portrait, trying to line up twenty-three aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, and sisters, some of whom hated to be in the same time zone as their closest blood relatives.

Then there was the other point-one percent of his work. Glamour photography, some called it. Others called it soft-core or low-rent porn. Whatever. If this young woman wanted a picture of herself and her husband in boots, leather gear, and Christmas ornaments in front of an artificial tree, for the benefit of their rich friends, so be it. He would still make a pretty good bundle today, and would probably get to see this empty and pretty young thing out of her jeans and tight sleeveless blouse. Maybe it wasn't going to be a dreary day after all.

Then Mrs. Tate surprised him.

"Oh," she said, smiling widely. "I bet you thought we wanted something naughty, right? Like me in a nightie and Jack in a jockstrap or something."

"Uh, the thought did occur to me," he said, feeling slightly embarrassed and not enjoying the sensation at all.

She laughed again and quickly touched his leg. "Oh, nothing as plain or droll as that. It's just that I wanted to put Blake and Terry in their place. I had this idea, a theme really, of what to put on our Christmas card. You see, I wanted something that said 'Christmas Was a Killer This Year,' and have a picture of the two of us on the couch. Dead."

"Dead?"

An enthusiastic nod. "Dead, yes. The two of us on the couch, next to the tree and the gifts, and quite dead." She giggled. "Nice and still and dead. Don't you get it? 'Christmas Was a Killer This Year.' Let's see if they can top that one."

He literally had no idea what to say next, and was saved when there was a clumping sound from the stairs at the far wall, and

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Mr. Jack Tate came into view. Clay stood up as the other man strode over. He was a few inches taller than Clay and had on summer clothes that said he was well-off and enjoying himself mightily: light pink polo shirt, khaki shorts with a thin leather belt, gold watch on one wrist and gold chain on the other, and deck shoes that looked a week old. His face was unlined and tanned, and he had a thick moustache. His black hair was cut short and was sprinkled with gray; his wife squealed a greeting and stood up and kissed him on the cheek.

"Jack Tate," he said, holding out his hand, and Clay resisted an urge to say, *Oh? I thought you were Raoul, the local gigolo.* Clay shook hands and let the other man win the fist-clenching, knuckle-popping contest. Jack had a pleased grin, thinking that he had just out-squeezed the photographer, while Clay kept his grin to himself, knowing that if he wanted to, with an extra squeeze, he could have taken him down to his knees and broken that fine-looking nose with a jab from his elbow.

Jack Tate put his arm around his wife. "Did Chrissy tell you about her crazy idea?"

"Yes, she did at that."

"Oh, hon," she protested, "it's not such a crazy idea."

Oh yes, it is, Clay thought. He spoke up. "Just so I'm straight on this, you want a Christmas-card photo showing the two of you dead, on this couch. In color."

"That's right," Chrissy said. "Will that be a problem?"

Problem? He thought about bringing these two back to reality. He thought about telling them that about a mile or two from this home—hell, mansion!—were families living in house trailers and cottages that could fit in this living room. That these families didn't have to pretend at playing dead, because death was always about, always visiting. Whether in the form of a late-night visit from police officers describing a drunken drive home gone bad, or an emergency room visit after a chainsaw accident working in the woods, or a funeral-home visit because somebody's dad worked with asbestos at the shipyard for twenty years, death was always around. And it wasn't a playful companion.

"No," he said. "It won't be a problem at all. First, what did you have in mind? How exactly did you want to set this up?"

And Jack brought him right down to earth with a sharp look. "Hey, now," he said, lowering his arm from his wife's shoulder. "We're the ones paying you. That's the deal, right? If you can't come up with a good idea or two, then we'll find someone else. Clear?"

Clay held his hands behind his back as he clenched his fists. He knew Jack's type. Lived and played in a world where hammering the other guy meant stealing his money. He wondered how long

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Jack would last in a world where hammering the other guy literally meant dropping him to the ground and going after his ribs and testicles with heavy workboots. He let out a deep breath, relaxed his hands.

"Clear. I have a couple of ideas already. I didn't know if you had anything particular in mind."

Chrissy smiled, trying to defuse the tension. "No, we'll just follow your lead. Pretend we're your models or something. Okay?"

He nodded. "Sure. Let me set up my gear and we can get started in about ten to fifteen minutes."

Jack dismissed him with a nod and went into the kitchen with his wife, and once again, Clay felt like the Invisible Man. He bustled around the wide living room, laying out power cables, setting up light stands and flash shields, opening up his tool box so he would have ready access to the spare bulbs, screwdriver, tiny hammer, duct tape, and anything else he needed. While he worked, Jack and Chrissy stood by the counter in the kitchen, both of them now drinking from tall glasses. It was muggy, and Clay felt sweat running down his back, and he looked enviously at the drinks Jack and Chrissy were holding. Not once did they offer him a drink, and not once did he think of asking. He wouldn't ask. He wouldn't beg.

All the while he worked, he heard snippets of conversation from the couple.

He: " . . . want to get this wrapped up so we can get over to the club . . ."

She: " . . . but try to stay away from the Morrisons' daughter, you're just embarrassing her and infuriating me . . ."

He: ". . . if you didn't drink as much as you did . . ."

She: ". . . at least it's done in private, and at least I don't paw teenage girls . . ."

He: ". . . for the last time, I wasn't pawing, her neck hurt and I was . . ."

Clay straightened up, his back aching a bit from bringing in the rest of the gear and from doing the setup work. He cleared his throat and Jack and Chrissy looked over. The Invisible Man was now visible.

"I'm ready to start if you are," he said, and they came in from the kitchen, leaving their drinks behind. The living room now had a 35 mm camera on a tripod, and two flash arrangements with reflective screens. Power lines snaked across the floor, and for a moment Clay felt good at what he had just done. He probably could have gotten away with half of the equipment and most of the aggravation, but for what he intended to charge these two nitwits when the day was done he wanted to make sure that they at least felt they got their money's worth.

Jack and Chrissy came out to the living room and Clay went to

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one of his gear packs, pulled out a Polaroid instant camera. Jack eyed what Clay held in his hand and said, "All this work and you're going to take our picture with that toy?"

Clay tried not to squeeze the camera too hard. "No, this is just what I use for a sample shot. That way I can make sure everything's blocked right and that the scene looks good."

Chrissy said, "Oh, Jack, leave the poor man alone. Look, where do you want us?"

"Sit right on the couch for now, and we'll take it from there."

As Clay watched, they both sat down on the couch, the Christmas tree and gifts to the left. He moved the coffee table away so their legs and feet could be visible, and he stepped back and lifted up the camera, and then lowered his arms.

It was all wrong.

Jack said, "What's up now?"

Clay shook his head. "It doesn't work."

"You haven't taken a single picture and already there's something wrong?" Jack demanded.

"It's your clothes," Clay said.

"And what's the matter with our clothes?"

He took a breath, held it, let it out. "The problem is, you have a Christmas tree and gifts piled up next to you. It's supposed to be Christmastime, but you're both dressed for the summer. I'm sorry, it doesn't work. If you want to make this look realistic, you've got to start with the basics. And the basics are the clothes."

Chrissy said, "What do you suggest?"

"Something a bit more formal, something that suggests it's December. Maybe a dress for you and long pants and a shirt for—"

Jack stood up, face red. "Nice thinking, pal. If you'd have thought of this ten minutes ago, we'd already be that much further along."

Chrissy stood next to her husband, arm quickly around him. "Now, Jack, you know he's right. C'mon, I know exactly what we'll wear. I've got that silly elf costume I wore two winters ago for that club party, and you can get those dreadful suspenders and tie that Aunt Cecile sent you. C'mon, it'll be a scream."

Jack seemed to calm down, but he still shook his head as he headed to the stairs. "All right, but let's hurry it up. I still don't want to be late."

When they'd both gone upstairs Clay walked over to the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the lawn and the lake. He let out a breath with a low *whoosh* and leaned forward until his forehead was up against the glass. He was hot and tired and thirsty and felt like rolling up the sleeves on his shirt. He could hear them upstairs, going through dresser drawers and closets. If he had his druthers, he'd pack up his gear and get out of here before they came down, but he couldn't. This would be a good-paying job when

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it was wrapped up, and he had worked too hard and long in setting up this legit business to let his irritation get the best of him. Don't let this one get away from you. Don't.

Just an hour or so, he thought. Get through the next hour or so and then we'll be all done. They'll be at their overpriced club with their overpriced friends, and we'll be back at our apartment, music on the stereo, steaks on the grill, and maybe we can invite up that single mom from downstairs, Melissa. Even if he just rented a video and sat on the couch and made some popcorn he was sure he'd have more fun and satisfaction tonight than these two.

A woman's voice from the stairs: "Ta da!"

He turned. Chrissy Tate was there, all smiles and not much else. She had on a red velvet costume with intricate green embroidery that did make her look like an elf, but only a fantasy elf for some adult Santa. It was short on the legs and had a scoop cut up front, and hugged her quite nicely. A red stocking hat with a white pompom on the end topped off her head, and she had on short high-heeled leather boots and black stockings.

"What do you think?" she asked slyly, walking over to him, the heels tap-tapping on the tile floor.

He found his voice. "It looks . . . it looks quite nice."

She dipped, as in a curtsy. It looked like she was carrying two neckties in her left hand. She came closer, lowered her voice. "Tell me, when you're done, when will you have prints ready for us to look at?"

"Five, six days," he said.

She smiled, lowered her voice even more. "Then bring them by Friday next. To the house. Jack . . . he'll be away on business that day. Okay?"

Oh, my, he thought. He just nodded, and in a desperate attempt to change the subject, "What's up with the neckties? Your husband couldn't decide?"

She laughed. "Oh, nothing like that. I figured that instead of just lying on the couch with our eyes closed we could pretend to be strangled or something. It'd make it look more realistic."

"It sure would," he said carefully.

Then came the sounds of feet on the stairs and Jack joined them, his face still flushed. Clay looked at him and kept his face neutral. No use pissing off a paying customer. Jack had on polished black shoes, black trousers, white shirt, and wide and loud suspenders that showed Santa Claus, reindeer, Christmas trees, and gift boxes. He also had on a bow tie made from the same pattern.

"All right," he grumbled. "Let's get this over with. I tell you, I'm not doing this again next year, even if Blake and Terry send us a Christmas card with the two of them aboard the goddamn space shuttle."

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They sat down and Chrissy looked up at him, handing over the ties. "Why don't you set us up and tell us what to do."

He held the soft silk ties in his hands, looked down at the two of them, his mouth quite dry. He wished he had snuck a drink while they were upstairs. "Okay, if you're going to pretend you're dead, you'll have to do it right. Why don't you both settle in on opposite sides of the couch. All right, like that. Now splay out your legs. You're not sitting up, sitting nice. No, you've got to remember, your body's not moving, it's slack. Um, you're dead. Okay?"

Clay stepped back, looked through the 35 mm camera's viewfinder. Jack was on the right side of the couch, still looking pretty stiff as he lay back, his legs outstretched. His hands were folded in his lap. That will have to change, he thought. The man's wife, on the other hand, seemed to be getting into it. Her legs were splayed out wide, showing a lot of black pantyhose, and her arms were stretched out dramatically on the side of the couch, her face looking up at the ceiling, eyes closed.

He went back to the couch and said, "Okay, I'm going to put the neckties around your necks. Tell me when it gets too uncomfortable, all right?"

"Sure, sure," Jack said, his voice grumbling again. Clay went to the rear of the couch and looped the first necktie around Jack's neck and made a simple loop knot. He slowly drew it closed and Jack raised a hand, "Okay, that's fine." Clay stepped forward and adjusted the tie so that it wouldn't block the bow tie.

"Raise your head, just a bit," Clay said. "Now, look up at the ceiling. Good, that looks good."

He then went over to Chrissy, surprised that his hands were trembling slightly. Must be getting tired, he thought. Plus dehydrated. He looped the necktie around her slim neck and gently pulled it taut. "Is it too tight?"

A slight giggle. "Not tight enough. Don't worry, I can take it."

He wiped his hands dry on his jeans and then went back to the camera. He bent down and looked through the viewfinder. Out from the lake came the distant rumble of an approaching thunderstorm. The air was now thick, warm, and still. He blinked his eyes and looked through the viewfinder again. Jack and Chrissy Tate. Playing at dead. Must be nice to have the time and money to waste on such things.

Clay picked up the Polaroid camera. "These will just be some test shots, that's all. So please don't move."

The camera felt good in his hands as he moved about the living room, taking about a half-dozen pictures. With each *click-flash-whir,* a square of slowly-developing paper was spewed out and he fanned the pictures across the coffee table. He tried not to think of the increasingly oppressive heat, the dryness of his mouth, or the

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sweat trickling down his arms and back. He just focused on what was in the tiny viewfinder, trying to get the best picture he could.

After a few minutes he said, "All right, folks. Let's take a look at what we've got."

The Tates got up from the couch, and while Chrissy kept the necktie around her slim neck, Jack made a production of tugging his loose. They clustered around the coffee table and Jack said, "It looks fake."

Clay agreed. "That's right. It looks like the two of you are lying on the couch with neckties around your necks."

"What else can we do?" Chrissy asked, a hint of disappointment in her voice.

"Something bloody," Jack murmured, looking down at the photos.

"Excuse me?" Clay asked.

He picked up one of the developed prints, let it fall to the table. "C'mon," Jack said. "If we're going to waste time doing this, the least we can do is to make it right. We can make it bloody. Make it look like we got shot or something."

Chrissy spoke up, her voice no longer disappointed. "See, I told you that you'd get into it, Jack. We can use some fake blood, like food coloring, and those toy guns."

Clay spoke up. "Guns?"

"Yeah, we have a couple of nephews who come up and raise hell every now and then. We have a couple of .38 revolvers that are cap guns but look pretty realistic."

Guns, he thought. Now we're playing with toy guns. I've got to get this wrapped up and finished. This couple is driving me nuts.

Aloud he said, "That sounds like a good idea. Do you have an old sheet you could put over the couch?"

"Sure we do," she said, heading to the kitchen. "But first, let me get the red food coloring."

Clay went back to his camera gear and then scooped up the prints as Chrissy came out of the kitchen and headed to the stairs leading up to the second floor. "I'll be back in a couple of minutes!"

Jack nodded and stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows, arms folded. Far up the lake the sky was darker and there was the low grumbling of thunder. "Looks like rain," he said.

Clay made himself busy by wiping down one of his camera lenses. He was surprised when the man turned and said, "You feel like a beer or something?"

That was the best thing he had heard all day. "Yeah, a beer would be great."

In a minute they were in the large kitchen and Jack opened the stainless-steel door of the refrigerator, which looked like it had enough food to last the summer. He pulled out two Sam Adams

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and Clay greedily drank almost half of his in one long, delicious swallow. Maybe the day was improving after all. Maybe.

Jack leaned back against the large refrigerator. "You been doing photo work for long?"

"A couple of years."

"Do you like it?"

A shrug. "Most times. Usually it's pretty straightforward stuff. Weddings. Family portraits. Class reunions."

Jack took a swallow of his beer. "I'd guess today's not pretty straightforward, am I right?" And Jack grinned, like he knew exactly what Clay was thinking.

Clay smiled back. The day was definitely improving. And to show his appreciation, he'd boost the final bill another ten percent.

"Yeah, I must admit, seeing a Christmas tree set up in June gave me a start there for a second."

Another wide smile. "That's Chrissy for you. She's a good girl, a guy couldn't ask for anything better. But when she gets her mind set on something, watch out. She really wanted a Christmas card this year to stand out, and I figure to go along. Why the hell not? Makes her happy and keeps her quiet. Jesus, it sure is hot, isn't it? Air conditioning on this floor isn't worth shit."

Then, maybe a bit loopy on the beer and easy conversation, Clay made a mistake, and knew it the minute he did. It was hot, damn it, and he rolled up the sleeves on his black turtleneck shirt.

Jack spotted it instantly. "Man, those are interesting tattoos."

Idiot, he fumed quietly. Why the hell did you go and do that?

Clay kept his voice neutral. "One of these days I'll save up enough and have them burned off. They use lasers nowadays."

"Hmmm," Jack said, eyeing his forearms. "Bleeding skulls, daggers, and a rattlesnake. Pretty interesting."

Clay said nothing.

"Friend of mine, he's a cop down in Manchester," Jack said, his voice now inquisitive. "Said tattoos like that, ones that are blue-black and blurry around the edges, you can only get them in one place. Prison."

Clay took a small swig of the beer. "Really?"

Jack nodded. "Unh-hunh. So tell me, did you get those while you were in jail?"

Clay stared at the man's eyes, seeing a flinty hardness, the inquisition coming right at him. So, Jack was no doubt thinking, *who are you and why are you in my house?*

Clay tried to smile. "Yeah, long time ago. When I was young and dumb."

There, he thought. That was an easy lie.

Jack now looked fascinated. "Really? What for?"

Quick, it was now time for lie number two. "Stupid stuff. I got

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drunk in a bar and some guy was coming on to my girlfriend. I didn't like it and we started fighting. Problem was, I got pretty rough with him and I had a juvenile record for stealing a couple of cars, so I got extra time tagged on. But I did my sentence and I've been clean ever since."

Sure, the voice inside him said. Clean and uncaught.

"That's wild," Jack said. "Prison. Man, that must have been something."

"Yeah," Clay agreed. "It was something."

A voice from the living room. "Fellas, come on back, I've got the stuff."

He followed Jack out into the room, where Chrissy had spread a white sheet over the couch. A tube of red food coloring and two toy guns were on the coffee table. The guns were black plastic and did look real. Jack spoke up as he stepped over to his wife. "You want to hear something, something interesting?"

"Sure," his wife said.

Jack gestured to Clay, and Clay wished he had never come here. "Our photographer here. He's actually done prison time. Can you believe that? An ex-con, in our house. Wait till I tell the people at the club tonight who we had in our house."

Chrissy looked at Clay, straight on, and just smiled. It didn't look like the thought bothered her at all. "Was it hard, being in prison?"

He looked away, picked up the food-coloring tube. "Yeah, it was hard. Look, I don't want to waste any more of your time. Let's get this going."

Jack and Chrissy pulled the white sheet taut against the couch and sat down. The room was darker, as the storm clouds from the other end of the lake had headed in the direction of the house. There was another low rumble of thunder. Clay handed over the toy revolvers, conscious of the bare feeling of having his turtleneck sleeves rolled up.

"Hold the guns in your hand, but limp-like," he said. "Remember, you're dead. Okay, now lean back, let your bodies rest. Lean your heads back, as well."

Chrissy spoke up, her eyes closed. "So, what's it going to look like? Something like the two of us shooting each other at the same time?"

Jack laughed sharply. "Yeah, you wish," and Clay noticed that his voice was now slightly slurred. That beer back in the kitchen certainly hadn't been his first drink of the day.

"Sure, something like that," Clay said. "I'm going to use the food coloring now."

He picked up the food-coloring tube and just looked at the scene for a moment, running possibilities through his mind. Chrissy on the left, Jack on the right. Bodies look okay, toy revolvers are visible. Only thing left to do is to make them look dead. The room lit

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up as a flash of lightning struck somewhere out on the lake. The low rumble of the thunder made a couple of the knickknacks on the shelves tremble.

Go on, he thought. Another half-hour and we'll be done, and this bill will be so high, it'll make their eyes pop out.

"Here's what I'm thinking," he said. "Jack, I'll put some food coloring on your forehead, to make it look like you got shot there. I'll also spray some on the sheet behind you, so that it's more realistic, like the bullet went out the back of your head. Chrissy, I'll try the front of your dress, but it's so dark I'm not sure—"

"My chest," she said, interrupting. "Just below my throat, put some on my skin. I don't mind. I'm not shy."

Another slurred comment from Jack. "Yeah, she sure as hell ain't shy. The Fourth of July pool party, where you took off—"

"Shut up," she said sharply, and Clay noticed how Jack swallowed and his face turned red.

"Okay," he said. "Head and chest wounds."

He did Jack first, dribbling some of the red food coloring on his forehead. With his head leaning back, it looked impressive, though the color was all wrong. Not ruddy enough. Clay then squeezed some of the food coloring onto his fingers and snapped it on the sheet, making a spray pattern. Idiots, he thought. You'd think they'd wonder how and why he knew so much about wounds.

Now, Chrissy's turn. He noticed the slight smile on her face, the way her neck was quivering. Just below her throat and above the swell of her exposed cleavage, he made two dribbles of the red food coloring on her skin. She seemed startled for a moment at the sensation, and then eased back and smiled wider.

"Guess I'll be ready for a nice long shower when this is over," she murmured.

Clay didn't say anything in reply.

Back at his camera gear, he picked up the Polaroid again for some test shots. Again, the reassuring *click-flash-whir*. "How's it going?" she asked.

"In just a minute, I'll show you. But don't get up from the couch. If you decide that they're good enough, I'll switch right over to the thirty-five millimeter."

He held the pieces of developing paper in his hand, and after they had focused into sharpness, he went over to the couch. "Here you go," he said, handing them to Jack and Chrissy.

Then it went wrong, very quickly.

Jack sat up and exploded, tossing the photos across the floor. "Are you kidding me? Showing us those pieces of crap? They look worse than the other ones! It looks like we're dressed up for Halloween, never goddamn mind Christmas! It doesn't look real at all!"

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"Jack, listen to—" his wife started, her eyes wide and open, but he wouldn't let her speak.

"No, you listen, you stupid witch! You've made us waste half a day sitting around for this stupid idea of yours, and for what? So this nitwit you found in the phone book, some guy fresh out of prison, can cheat us with a bill when we're through?"

Clay felt his knees begin to tremble with nervous energy. "Mr. Tate, I don't cheat anyone. That's not how I do my business."

Tate laughed again, face quite red. "Man, I deal every day with guys a hell of a lot sharper than you, minute by minute. I could smell you a mile away. Thought you could razzle-dazzle us with all this photo-gear crap and then get enough cash to buy a boat or some damn thing. Well, it's not going to work! Clean up your trash and get out of my house!"

Chrissy tried again, but it was Clay who interrupted. "I have a deal for you."

There. The man looked interested. "You do? What kind of deal?"

The only type you'll understand, he thought. Clay looked around the room. "Here's what I'm offering. I've got another idea of how to make this work. If that happens, and you agree, then I'll charge you just materials. No labor. And if the idea doesn't work, then I'll leave, free and clear, and you won't owe me a thing."

"How long?" Jack demanded.

"Just a few minutes," he said.

Chrissy said, "It sounds reasonable, Jack. You know it does."

Her husband made a show of settling back down on the couch, not quite hiding the triumph in his eyes. "You want it to sound reasonable so you're not embarrassed. That's why. Okay, photo man. Go ahead. You've got five minutes."

Clay stepped away from the couch, headed back over to his photo gear. "Five minutes it is," he said. "Just lie back and keep your eyes closed."

Chrissy then said something low and sharp to her husband, and he replied, and she said, "Hunh, we'll see about that!"

Clay squatted down on the floor, let his fingers rummage through his toolbox. Another flare of light as the thunderstorm approached. He had tried. Honest he had, from setting up the legit business to going on the straight and narrow, never letting anything get away from him.

But they had pushed and prodded him, right from the moment he had arrived. They had asked him. Customer's choice, he thought. Not my fault.

There. He found what he was looking for. He stood up.

"Here I come," he said, and as he walked over to them he held the hunting knife close to his thigh, letting a thumb lovingly and caressingly go over the sharp blade. ●

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The Gooseberry Fool

by James Powell

Readers who enjoyed James Powell's April 1999 story "Jerrold's Meat" will be pleased to learn that the tale is currently nominated for Canada's most prestigious mystery prize, the Arthur Ellis Award. Mr. Powell has ten (yes, ten!) previous nominations for the Arthur Ellis. This year's winner will be announced in Toronto at the end of May (just a few days from this writing). May this be your year, Jim! †

On the early 1880s Europe was visited each year by a plague of assassinations at the hands of the same hired killer. The Continent's prefects of police christened this man the Gooseberry Fool because his annual itinerary approximated that of the hero in Andre Jurry's incomparable operetta of the same name.

Jurry's music told the legend of a nobleman from a northern clime whose passion for gooseberries sent him rattling southward in his carriage as soon as the roads were passable, startling crocuses from the ground and gilding willows along the way as if he were spring itself. Down the Danube valley, down the Adriatic coast to the very heel of the Italian boot he rolled and then was ferried, carriage and all, across to Corfu where Europe's first gooseberries hung ripe on the bush. Through spring and summer, the nobleman followed the maturing fruit northward in easy stages up into France and Germany, with a final cold, autumnal rush across the gooseberry fields of East Prussia.

But even though the police knew the which-way and the when—MURDER BY RAILROAD SCHEDULE, the newspapers called it—such was the Gooseberry Fool's skill and mastery of disguise that they could no more prevent his first assassination than stop the arrival of the first robin of the year. The hired killer came with a full order book and claimed his victims until the foliage turned.

Customarily, the police would have sought help from the fearsome Ambrose Ganelon, founder of San Sebastiano's famous

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detective agency. But age had dimmed those fabled powers, while his son and namesake remained an untried cub, a tinkerer among test tubes and flammarion flasks.

On a Saturday morning in July, 1885, Ambrose Ganelon II emerged from 18 bis rue Blondin, the family residence and the offices of the Ganelon detective agency, carrying a small suitcase. More than just a taller version of the father, the son's long legs, so becoming in his cavalry-officer days, now gave him a civilian elegance. Where the Founder, all scowl and armchair, brooded over cases like a python digesting a pig, until only the skeleton of truth remained, the son perambulated, preferring to talk things out on long walks about the city, his companions struggling to match his stride. At a later date, his elegance and tenacity would earn him the nickname, the *Bouledogue des Boulevards.*

A policeman with dandruff on his cape guarded the agency's doorway. One had for years now, since the Founder's faculty of ratiocination was declared a treasure of the principality. Acknowledging his salute, Ganelon went to stand at the curb. He could almost hear the policeman ask himself why a Ganelon was leaving town during Gooseberry Fool alert. Was San Sebastiano to go the way of Paris, protecting itself from the assassin by following its prefect of police on vacation for the month of August, leaving the city to waiters and American tourists?

But the Gooseberry Fool had not yet dared kill in San Sebastiano. Ganelon, who did not want to remain forever in his father's shadow, wished he would try. In any event, Ganelon was not going far. Young Baron Charles Sandor lived only a few miles away across the Porpentine, the river which until twenty-five years ago marked the eastern boundary of San Sebastiano just as the Tortue marked its western limits (a fact which explains why the supporters of San Sebastiano's busy coat of arms are that marriage made in heaven, the turtle and the porcupine).

The Sandor money came from Vieux Gaspard's Ointment, a preparation named after a local of the previous century legendary for his age and limberness of joints. The current baron's grandfather, Baron Justin, an avid phrenologist (some said he possessed an immense bump of credulity), had assembled for study a collection of plaster heads of murderers.

Ganelon had written some months ago for permission to examine Baron Justin's collection. Though impressed by the recent anthropometric work of the phrenologist Bertillon, Ganelon considered the man's fourteen identification measurements clumsy. He hoped to find his own cluster of three or four unique to each individual on the skull near the sphenoid bone.

Having the patience of plaster, the baron's heads would be far

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easier to measure than Ganelon's restless friends. He was beginning to believe the Sandors still bore an ancient grudge against the Ganelons because the Founder brought one of their servants to book for murder. Then yesterday evening he received a hand-delivered invitation to spend the weekend studying the heads and to meet the Hereditary Nawab of Jamkhandi and some of Sandor's business associates, all come for the hunting.

The Nawab was renowned in his own land as a builder of hospitals, temples, and schools, and famous abroad as a student of the human conscience, eager to promote whatever might increase mankind's desire to do good and avoid evil.

The Sandor carriage arrived punctually, the crest on the door bearing the same figure of the lean old man leaping in air to kick his heels which graced each bottle of Vieux Gaspard's Ointment. Ganelon expected it would have first met the early train from Milan and was not surprised to find a passenger inside. His traveling companion looked up from a gilt-edged prayer book; his long, pale face was made longer and paler still by a flourish of black sideburns. The vehicle reeked of lavender cologne.

Ganelon introduced himself. The man closed the book on his finger, ready to flee back into it should the new arrival prove unedifying. "Lars Thorwald of Christiania," he replied, adding, "The great detective? I expected a much older man."

"You're thinking of my father," said Ganelon, as he had so many times before.

Thorwald bowed, then sniffed the air. "I must explain I do not use a scent. Signor Antonio Cipriani, who left aboard the same train which brought me here, spilled the contents of his atomizer onto the carriage floor while fortifying his handkerchief against the journey. The coachman promises to air things out when we're in the country and he can whip up the horses."

Thorwald looked grave. "Several days ago, in Milan, Cipriani and I toured Vieux Gaspard's new bottling works together. Though his cheeks were as bare as those cherubs which infest Italian art and his straw-colored vest dared to match his gloves *and* his spats, I judged him a superior type of individual. For a Neapolitan."

For many, Africa began at Naples. Englishmen swore by Calais. Ganelon understood some Scandinavians said at Lübeck.

The carriage started off. Thorwald gripped his bowler as if it were self-satisfaction itself. Was it the prospect of meeting the Nawab of Jamkhandi which made Ganelon think of the Solemn Order of Snarks? This secret terrorist brotherhood worshipped the fabulous Snark in its third incarnation:

"The third is its slowness in taking a jest.
Should you happen to venture on one,

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It will sigh like a thing that is deeply distressed:
And it always looks grave at a pun."

Years ago, on the Nawab's first visit to Europe, a bomb had been thrown into his carriage in a Dresden street. The sputtering device passed through one window and out the other and bounced down some steps before exploding in a pastry-shop basement.

The Dresden police had reason to suspect Snarks. Some months before, the Nawab, dressed in the colorful costume of his native land, chose to dine at Aladdin's, a London restaurant of an Arabian Nights decor. As his party approached the entrance, an English gentleman emerged and, mistaking the Nawab for the doorman, gave him sixpence and ordered he call him a cab. "All right, you're a cab," the Nawab replied. "But it will take more money than this to get me to call you hansom." The pun became famous throughout Europe. Yes, the Snarks hated the punster worst of all.

The carriage containing Ganelon and Thorwald left the city proper by the Porte de l'Est. Ganelon found something of historical interest to point out to Thorwald whenever his eyes crept toward his book. Suburban villas soon gave way to prosperous farms. Then they crossed the stone bridge with its ruined water mill and entered Transporpentine San Sebastiano.

In 1860, Sardinia ceded Savoy to France. Reviving Savoy's ancient claim to San Sebastiano, the French attacked at dawn across the winding Tortue river. The principality's outnumbered little army drove them back. Then, with San Sebastiano committed militarily on the west, the French cavalry appeared in force across the Porpentine. The bridge's few defenders barricaded themselves in the water mill, knowing no reinforcements could reach them through streets clogged with morning traffic.

The confident French, giving themselves over to brio, bugle blowing, and rushing about with messages, were astonished when San Sebastiano's crack sharpshooter regiment arrived, mounted behind the amazons of the women's chapter of the Club Vélocipède, who had darted there through traffic on their dashing penny-farthings. Brissac-Charbonelle's vivid paintings have immortalized the battle, the women in their broad pink-and-blue-striped jerseys, heads bent over the handlebars, the soldier-marksmen seated behind them firing left and right, the panic among the French horses. After the Half-Day War, as it came to be called, France was obliged to cede territory across the Porpentine which doubled the size of the principality.

Several miles onward, the easy slope of Mont St. Hugues and then the tower of the Sandor château appeared above the trees. The baroness, an attractive woman with an English wild-rose complexion, waited on the steps to greet them. Ganelon judged

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her several years older than her husband. They had met in England during the Sandor firm's failed merger talks with its principal rival, Old Father William's Supplifying Salve. Ganelon understood the baroness had been on the London musical stage.

When he and Throwald stepped down from the carriage, she laughed, "What a smell of lavender! For a moment I thought dear Signor Cipriani had come back to us." Then she apologized for her husband's absence. The hunters were still in the field.

The baroness impressed Ganelon as a steadfast wife, one who judges others by whether they can help her husband or harm him. Had he only imagined that she seemed particularly grateful he had come? Ganelon had been taught to expect ulterior motive behind social invitations. Fashionable hostesses used to ask the Founder to their affairs to scare off jewel thieves.

The detective was given into the hands of LeSage, a middle-aged servant with an intelligent face who led him down several corridors. For Ganelon's convenience, his rooms would be in the tower Baron Justin built to house his collection. "It will also be quieter for you, sir," explained Le Sage. "The old moat has been excavated around the château proper for foundation repairs and installing the new drains. The masons will be back on Monday."

Reaching the tower, they took an iron circular staircase. The first two floors housed the plaster heads in cubby holes, the third the grandfather's old living quarters, which were well aired and bright. The study was dominated by a large marble head marked out phrenologically. A framed daguerreotype on one wall showed two men standing before a horse-drawn caravan.

"If the bald gentleman is Baron Justin, the other must be Gaston, the child-killer," observed Ganelon.

"Bonhomme Pickle himself, sir. In Paris. Usually they set up shop across from the Prison de la Roquette, where heads rolled like cabbages at harvest time. Their wagon held all they needed to make casts before returning the heads to the bereaved." LeSage pointed to a thick binder on the desk. "The registry, sir. Whenever you're ready to begin, I'll fetch the heads you'd like to see."

Ganelon got quickly to work with calipers and notebook while LeSage brought up four heads at a time in containers resembling hatboxes. After two hours of slow, careful measurements Ganelon heard the growl of iron on stone in the courtyard and went to the window. Gamekeepers were pushing a handcart heaped with dead grouse across the cobbles. Behind them came the hunters in an array of hats and buttoned gaiters.

Arriving with more hatboxes, LeSage joined Ganelon at the window. "There's his excellency the Nawab, sir," he said, pointing to a man with a round, café-au-lait face wearing a knickerbocker suit

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of the latest fashion. "And there, next to him, is Major Leland Sowerby."

Ganelon knew of Sowerby, whom the Nawab had graciously asked to join his permanent staff after he'd been driven from the Indian Army for gambling debts.

Next came the baron, his face open and boyish, proudly pointing out an aspect of the new drains to a lanky man in an old fringed-buckskin jacket. "Vieux Gaspard's North American representative?" guessed the detective.

"Mr. Caleb Hardacre, sir," nodded LeSage.

"And the duelist?" A slighter man marched behind, one jacket lapel tucked in across his shirt front as if to deny an adversary a white target in the meager light of dawn.

"Herr Franz Gruber of Leipzig, sir. Our Central European representative."

As the hunting party passed from sight, Ganelon returned to his work, which wasn't going as well as he'd hoped. The next few hours might prove or—as seemed more likely—disprove his thesis. He decided to work through luncheon, taking the meal on a tray. But in the meantime, his concentration became half-hearted. The parade of bald heads kept reminding him of Baron Justin who took "Know Thyself" as his motto and, long before Ganelon was born, had been a familiar sight walking about town thoughtfully reading the bumps on his shaven skull with his fingertips.

In the 1850s, Christian charity and phrenological inquiry led Baron Justin to establish an orphanage for the care and education of 153 street urchins (the legendary number of Scripture's miraculous draught of fishes), keeping the boys' heads shaven to better chart their phrenological development. Their uniform of baggy red trousers, blue short-coat, and red fez earned them the nickname the Petits Zouaves de Vieux Gaspard.

For recruitment, Baron Justin encased his servant, Gaston, in an immense green papier-mâché gherkin and sent him to the spices and condiments fair in the Place Madagascar, where he sold an excellent dill from a tray. A street urchin who let Bonhomme Pickle examine his head got a free dill and a chance at the coveted brass token, which meant entry into the orphanage.

The arrival of the young baron, now changed out of his hunting clothes, interrupted Ganelon's musings over this story, which would end so tragically. "Welcome, Monsieur Ganelon," said his host, smiling broadly and setting down the detective's luncheon tray. "May I intrude on your meal?" At Ganelon's urging the baron pulled over a chair, sat down, and beamed at the son of a national treasure of the principality. "You know, every birthday and Christmas my father gave me a Marchpane book." Austin Marchpane wrote popular accounts of the Founder's most famous cases.

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"Until *Ganelon and the Pickled Boys?*"

"That *did* hit rather close to home."

Ganelon imagined that it had. "My father would never let a Marchpane book in the house," he said. The Founder denounced the many mannerisms the author concocted for him. Yet, Ganelon knew, his father had never uttered his loud accusatory "Ah-ha!" until Marchpane used it in *The Bridge of Traded Dreams.* And it wasn't until *Spawn of the Corsican Eagle,* where Marchpane touched on his hero's paternity, that the Founder began plastering a forelock down over his brow and posing, fingertips inside his jacket.

The baron's thoughtful smile lingered. Then he turned grave and leaned forward. "My dear sir, I need your help. One of the Nawab's cufflinks has been stolen." When Ganelon cocked a disappointed eye, the Baron added urgently, "A large blue sapphire."

"And does this sapphire have religious or dynastic significance?" wondered Ganelon. "An eye from a temple goddess, perhaps, whose desecration must be washed away with human blood? Or does the loss foretell some doom for the Nawab or his house?"

The baron blinked. "Not that he mentioned. In fact, he urges me to forget the whole incident. Easier said than done. You see, it means I have invited a thief under my roof."

"Forgive me. I draw the line at stray cufflinks."

Sandor appeared crestfallen. In a moment he brightened. "Then how about lurking around a bit? You know, to make the thief think you're on the case?"

"You mean behind the potted palm?" The detective had to smile. Yet he could understand how the new baron might be unnerved by the thought of tarnishing his family name so soon. He put down his knife and fork. "Why don't you bring me up to date."

The baron pulled his chair closer. "The Nawab's manservant put the cufflinks away in the jewel case Wednesday night. Dressing his master for Thursday dinner, he found one missing."

"And who was here at that time?"

"Let me see. The Nawab arrived with Major Sowerby on Tuesday, from Rome, to see our orphanage with an eye to starting something similar in Jamkhandi. Mr. Hardacre and Signor Cipriani arrived Wednesday from Milan. This will be my first chance to meet the new Vieux Gaspard representatives my father chose just before his death last year. Of the other two, Herr Gruber didn't come until after dinner on Thursday. A pickpocket stole his wallet in Milan and lack of identification delayed him at the border. And, of course, Mr. Thorwald arrived with you this morning, bedridden in Milan with traveler's stomach until yesterday. I am sure the cufflink was stolen late Thursday afternoon."

When Ganelon asked why, the baron explained, "Because that

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was when my wife saw the Phantom Balloon." He smiled and added, "Who else but dear Louise?"

Ganelon understood. With Paris under siege during the Franco-Prussian War, the French evacuated the gold in the national treasury in hot-air balloons of a novel design. Each carried galvanic batteries to heat the air by means of a metal probe. When the balloon flotilla encountered fierce thunderstorms over the Massif Central, one balloon developed a loose battery connection. As it lost altitude, the crew dumped the precious cargo. When that failed to stop the descent, they escaped hand over hand along the tether line to their nearest neighbor. The damaged balloon was cut free and drifted southwestward, coming to rest in the forest north of San Sebastiano, where it became a local legend, rising into the air and coming to earth again at the loose battery connection's whim. It was said that the Phantom Balloon could pass overhead unseen until noticed by one whose heart was pure. Hence Sandor's "Who else but dear Louise?"

"When my wife rushed in with the news, the château spilled out onto the lawn, servants and all. I think that was when the thief stole the cufflink. We never saw the balloon, by the way. The wind must have shifted."

"I understand one of your guests left this morning."

The baron nodded. "Poor Cipriani. Oh yes, I know how it looks. But he couldn't have been the thief. With tears in his eyes and the carriage at the door, he begged me, for the sake of his honor, to search his person and his luggage. I reluctantly agreed. LeSage and I were thorough, I assure you. No cufflink."

Sandor stood up. "So there we are. After luncheon tomorrow I'm going to try a little parlor game suggested by one of our guests. If it doesn't get the cufflink back and you're done with the heads, may I put the matter in your hands?"

Ganelon returned to his measurements. But by late afternoon he had thrown down the calipers, closed his notebook, and turned away from the plaster head of Jean-Batiste Troppmann, the Kinck-family murderer. What he was looking for just wasn't there.

Time to turn his mind to the cufflink. Why steal a single sapphire cufflink when you could just as easily have taken both, a matched pair worth four times as much? Ganelon shook his head. You don't build a reputation catching stupid thieves. You needed someone like the Gooseberry Fool.

Or the murderer of the pickled boys. Some ten years after the Sandor orphanage opened, the corpses of four naked boys were discovered swirling slowly around in a solemn follow-the-leader in a sewer eddy beneath the Place d'Iota. Using his vast knowledge

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of the sewer system, the Founder calculated water flow and the modest Mediterranean tidal effect at that phase of the moon to pinpoint the exact sewer grating down which the bodies had been dropped. Brine in the victims' lungs led him to Bonhomme Pickle's warehouse only a hundred feet away. At first, old Gaston maintained boys from the neighboring Sandor orphanage had drowned stealing from his pickle barrels, their companions dumping the bodies into the sewer. But he could not explain the battering about the victims' heads. Taken into custody, Gaston would later confess to the murders and be sent to Duranceville prison for life. As for Baron Justin, his son took over the business and the old man never showed his poor, dog-eared head in San Sebastiano again.

No, they didn't make cases like the pickled boys anymore. But when Ganelon had voiced that same complaint on a recent visit to Father Sylvanus in his hermitage, the saintly priest had suggested that the Founder had solved his case by force of character alone, implying it was character not cases that Ganelon lacked.

As a boy, Ganelon had been sent to Father Sylvanus to learn the *via felix,* or the Happy Way, the forgotten medieval art of self-defence. An opponent was rendered horizontal with a hip lift and his body humors (blood, phlegm, choler, and bile) redistributed, producing a radical, if temporary, personality change. Ganelon's grammar had been a heavy board grooved with a maze in which four lead balls must roll but never collide. He practiced with it on his hip until he was as adept as his teacher. Now Ganelon wondered if the *via felix* could be self-applied. Might he stretch himself out horizontally, supported by a sawhorse in the small of his back, and redistribute his body humors until he had character or, at least, patience?

To business! If Cipriani wasn't the thief, and Gruber and Thorwald arrived after the cufflink was stolen, then Ganelon was left with two suspects: Sowerby and Hardacre.

As he concluded this reasoning, LeSage arrived to help him dress for dinner. While the detective stood before the mirror adjusting his white tie, LeSage said, "I think I should tell you, sir, you being a detective, that before your arrival I had the pleasure of caring for Mr. Hardacre's needs. While brushing out his vests, I discovered a business card. It read 'Jeremiah Wynne, North American Representative, Old Father William's Supplifying Salve.'"

"So he's been consorting with the enemy?"

"The Old Father William people are in financial straits and desperate to lay hands on our formula, sir. So I fiddled the lock on a curious flat leather box Mr. Hardacre brought with him. Inside was a full gray beard of the kind that hooks over the ears, and

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matching eyebrows. I never told the young baron. He'd be furious with my snooping through guests' things."

The guests gathered in the music room for a drink before dinner. "What a pleasure to meet the son of the great detective," said the Nawab of Jamkhandi. "I hope your father is well."

Ganelon lied and thanked him for his enquiry. Actually, the Founder was deep in the toils of oboe madness, an affliction common among woodwind players, whose compression of breath must eventually drive the upper palate into the very foundations of the brain. When the fit was on him, the Founder would rave about a love affair with a certain high personage whom he called Regina and see at every window the face of his nemesis Dr. Ludwig Fong, Eurasian arch-villain, chiropractor, and would-be master of the world.

Ganelon met the remaining guests. Suspect Sowerby had a flush face and a sad mouth made sadder by a turned-down moustache. Or was it the drink in his hand? Could Sowerby have stolen his benefactor's cufflink? Some people hate a benefactor most of all.

The duelist Herr Gruber, whose moustache-ends turned sharply upward, appeared something of a fire eater, his eyes aflash with the memory of his last such meal. After they met, Ganelon felt the man had been measuring him for an epée thrust.

Suspect Hardacre was mixing drinks. The American's weathered face suggested a sunburned neck beneath his collar and tie. "Pink-gilled," the English say, meaning "country bumpkin." But Hardacre was no yokel. Ganelon suspected he'd been among his countrymen who had lived in Europe during their Civil War as agents of the North or South. His French was fluent but encumbered, as though learned while he had the American habit of chewing tobacco. Could Hardacre be the thief? Surely a man who once chewed tobacco was capable of anything. And why the fake beard?

Louise Sandor took the detective by the arm, explaining, "Mr. Hardacre is mixing American cocktail drinks. Will you try one? Major," she asked Sowerby, "how do you find your . . .?"

"Tarantula Juice, ma'am," said Sowerby hoarsely, adding, "The name rather understates the taste."

Hardacre suggested a Lightning Bolt or Calamity Water. Ganelon chose the latter as sounding the least instantaneous. Then he raised his glass to Thorwald across the room. Thorwald wasn't drinking and replied with a bow. Was the self-righteous gentleman of the teetotal persuasion, too? Ganelon smiled to himself, remembering how Thorwald had shown no real interest in his running commentary during the carriage ride until the part about

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the Phantom Balloon only being seen by the pure of heart. From then on he missed no chance to sneak a glance skyward.

This reminded Ganelon of the lavender cologne. Could Cipriani's perfume atomizer have been used to smuggle the sapphire out of the château? He chatted his way over to the baron and asked if the atomizer had been examined. "Yes, I remember," said his host. "One of those blue glass things. LeSage took it all apart."

Just then a footman opened the dining room doors and everyone moved toward the table. The Nawab was given the place of honor on the baroness's right. Ganelon sat on his other side and offered his regrets for the stolen sapphire cufflink.

The Nawab dismissed the loss with a shake of his head. "My people believe that the Devil, that great aper of the Almighty, once tried to make an animal to match the horse in grace and beauty. But his best effort was the camel. And they say that when he saw how much we loved the beauty of God's flowers, the Devil hurried to his underground smithy and created precious stones, hoping their brightness would lure us from the righteous path. I have made a study of jewels. But they are the Devil's flower bed. We must never become attached to them."

"Some say a camel is a horse designed by a committee," replied Ganelon. "Could it be that the Devil is a committee?"

"He has faces enough to be many committees."

At the other end of the table, Thorwald had just pulled a bottle of Vieux Gaspard's Ointment from his coat pocket. "For Scandinavia, may I suggest one small change for the label?" he asked. "This old man smiles and kicks his heels in the air. But health is a serious business." As he spoke, Thorwald drew on the label with a pencil and sent the bottle around the table. "Conceal the smile thus. Now his eyes challenge us and say, 'I can do this. Why can't you?'"

When the bottle reached him Ganelon thought the penciled moustache on Gaspard's lip bore a striking resemblance to Gruber's. He handed it off to Hardacre, who burst out laughing. The German leaned over to look, turned red, and jumped to his feet. "Are you mocking me, sir?" he demanded of the American.

"Don't blow your stack, pard."

"Watch your words, sir," answered Gruber. "Your bowie knives and knuckle-dusters hold no fear for me. I eat uncouth boobies like you for breakfast!"

Hardacre was on his feet. "Watch what you try eating, friend," he warned, pulling up his coat sleeves. "Remember the Yankee oyster so big it took ten Germans to swallow it whole? I am that oyster, sir. I can handle shooting irons, too."

But seeing their outburst had distressed the baron, Hardacre

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sat back down. He forced a smile, rubbed the back of his neck, and added, "Not like another member of our hunting party."

Gruber barked out a laugh and sat down, too. "Yes, I hope the rest of the Indian Army shoots better than you do, Major."

"I believe I have already offered you gentlemen my apologies for the peppering," replied Sowerby.

"I forgave you when you ran off Cipriani," Gruber assured him. "Mollycoddles belong by the fireside, charming the ladies."

"Claimed I meant to murder him," protested Sowerby.

"You *did* shoot the hat off his head," said Hardacre.

The major scowled down at his plate.

"A borrowed hat," added Gruber. "Imagine tagging along on a hunt with a borrowed hat and stick."

"Stick or not, I think he shot as many birds as I did," observed the Nawab.

"It's your spanking-new hunting outfit that scares off the birds, your excellency," suggested Hardacre. "Our Henry Thoreau says beware of enterprises that require new clothes. Now, I'd happily sell you my old buckskin jacket."

As the table laughed, the Nawab wagged a mock-scolding finger and replied, "And I say, beware of enterprising used-clothes salesmen who quote Thoreau."

In the music room, after dinner, the baroness played the piano for their entertainment. There was talk of a game of whist. Thorwald chose to sit in a corner with his book. Gruber shook his head. "I shall retire shortly," he said, adding an ominous, "I am accustomed to rising before dawn."

While the card players were making up their game, Ganelon went over to turn the music for the baroness. "I always considered the Phantom Balloon cut from the same cloth as the emperor's new clothes," he remarked. "You have proven me wrong."

The baroness gave a sigh. "If you must know, I didn't see the blasted thing and never said I had. I was out on the lawn when Signor Cipriani burst from the woods, eyes like saucers, babbling about a great brown bag in the sky. It had to be our local phenomenon, the Phantom Balloon. So I raced back to the house shouting the news with Cipriani on my heels. Charles just assumed I'd been the one who'd seen it."

"And you never corrected his thinking?"

The baroness smiled without taking her eyes from the music. "Every wife wants her husband to believe her heart is pure, Monsieur Ganelon. Besides, Cipriani came to me later. His eyes must have been playing tricks on him, he said, and asked I not tell Charles, lest he be judged too excitable to be a Vieux Gaspard rep-

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resentative. I rather like dear, dithery Cipriani. I suspect he colors his hair."

Leaving the piano, Ganelon watched the men play cards for small stakes. He noticed that when Major Sowerby dealt, the Nawab got excellent cards, which he played very badly. After a bit, the detective bade the company good night and retired.

Thunder came. Then a steady rain began to fall. Ganelon sat on the edge of his bed and pondered how a cufflink could be worth an elaborate ruse like a Phantom Balloon sighting. He now became aware of a cold draft across his bare toes coming from under the carved highboy on the opposite wall. In his carpet slippers he tried to inch the heavy piece of furniture forward and was surprised when, with a click, it swung out into the room on concealed hinges, revealing an upward flight of stone steps.

Armed with a lamp, Ganelon mounted up into the darkness. The room beneath the conical roof was fitted with a cell with stout iron bars, whose door stood open. Crowded inside was an iron bedstead, a treadled potter's wheel, a box of hard rubber mallets and an ominous-looking bowl: a devilish grail of fire-scorched iron fitted about with large rusting screws. Cocking an eyebrow, Ganelon followed his footprints in the dust back down to bed.

Rising late the next morning, he found Hardacre playing pool alone in the billiard room. The man informed him that Gruber was off at pistol practice and the Sandors hadn't yet returned from church.

Ganelon said, "By the way, I recently met another American working in your line. Jeremiah Wynne?"

Leaning to make a shot, Hardacre laughed. "I reckon not. I'm Wynne." He straightened up and explained, "After the baron's father hired me on, I got wind the Old Father William people needed a North American man, too. So I paid them a visit in a fake beard. Hell, why not? Peddling both meant two salaries and double travel expenses. With the Big Drink between us, who'd be the wiser?"

"The baron deserves better."

Chalking his cue stick with care, Hardacre said, "A while back I found a thousand-legger—you know, a millipede—on my bedside rug. I stomped it good, and you know what? It was one of my own fake eyebrows. So the jig was up. I told the baron everything. He didn't mind. He said Old Father William would be bankrupt way before I got back home to the States.

In the music room, Ganelon found the Nawab deep in the *Times* of London and Sowerby playing Patience at a table nearby. And there, through a window, was Thorwald walking backwards

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across a muddy flower bed toward the château, his head thrown back on watch for the Phantom Balloon. He was coming dangerously close to the moat. As Ganelon moved to rap on the window glass, Thorwald reached the gravel path along the excavation work, turned, and walked away.

After a breakfast of coffee and a roll in the empty dining room, Ganelon asked LeSage to show him the hat and stick Cipriani had borrowed. LeSage led him back to the gun room and indicated a cloth hat with a peppering of small holes in the crown and a blackthorn from a rack of walking sticks.

"You also examined Cipriani's atomizer?" asked the detective, running his fingers over the stick.

"And needed several washings to rid my hands of the smell of lavender, sir."

"Could the blue bottle have hidden a blue sapphire?"

"The stone was much too large to pass through the neck of the bottle, sir," LeSage replied and took his leave.

The Nawab appeared in the doorway. "May I share a moral dilemma, Monsieur Ganelon?"

"You mean, should you admit you shot off Cipriani's hat, not Major Sowerby?" The Nawab's astonishment obliged Ganelon to add, "A great-aunt on my mother's side who was afflicted with flatulence late in life always kept an old cocker spaniel close by for scolding purposes should the need arise."

The Nawab understood. "Yes, Major Sowerby has very kindly taken upon himself my shortcomings with the shotgun," he admitted. "Yet I don't know how it happened. I knew Cipriani was there behind the bushes. I swear I shot high enough. Well, perhaps some day I will master the weapon."

"And whist, your excellency?" asked the detective.

The Nawab laughed at himself. "You can't become an English gentleman overnight. Still, I'd rather not call attention to my ineptitudes. But no one has ever left the table out of pocket because of the help Major Sowerby gives me."

Ganelon decided he needed a long walk in the open air to think things out. Leaving the château, he took the path toward the summit of Mont St. Hugues. If the perfume atomizer hadn't been used to smuggle out the sapphire, then nothing really made sense. Cipriani steals a single cufflink when he could have stolen the pair. To give himself an excuse to carry off his modest prize, he intrudes a borrowed hat on a borrowed stick into the hunters' line of fire, leaving telltale scratch marks of shot on the blackthorn. Sowerby, having been apologizing all morning for the Nawab,

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takes responsibility once more. Cipriani cries murder and decamps without the sapphire. No, it made no sense at all.

Up ahead, beyond where the path diverged, Gruber was sitting on a rustic bench, putting the finishing touches on cleaning his dueling pistol. Rising to go down to the nearby creek to wash the gun oil from his hands, he saw Ganelon and gave a polite bow. The detective bowed back before taking the upward path.

But the focused mind which came to Ganelon walking familiar streets eluded him in the country. Every step was a pleasant distraction. It would please the Nawab to know that wildflowers could hold him where the jeweler's window could not. He thought of the Doctrine of Signatures, which taught that plants of medicinal value bore a mark specifying their curative powers. He thought of Baron Justin trying to deduce character from bumps on the skull.

Reaching the summit, he stood beneath a blasted oak to admire the view. Beyond the Porpentine's curl he could make out a gray suggestion of the roofs of San Sebastiano, then the definite blue of the sea. Somewhere beyond lay the coast of Africa.

At the time of the Dresden bomb attempt on the Nawab, Ganelon had been serving in the Tripolitanian wars. One night, wrapped in his cape and staring into the campfire at the Sidi oasis, he wondered if the bomb thrower could have been Ludwig Fong. Killing doers of good deeds and thinkers of good thoughts was Fong's recreation, after all. Hadn't he himself set the fire that destroyed the convent where the blessed mystic, Mother Inez, communed with God? Hadn't he brewed the ink whose fumes killed the peacemakers about to sign the pact ending the Turco-Balkan War? And how many medical missionaries hurrying on some errand of mercy had taken a turning in the jungle trail and met a smiling Fong in the act of stripping off his goat-skin gloves?

But all that was idle speculation now. Fong was done killing with his own hands. During a recent medical missionary hunt he had contracted Zambezi, or Simpering Fever. Now even his felonious children fled his terrible doting smile. He shunned the light of day, living alone amid draped mirrors lest he stumble upon his smirk unawares. In an ironic intersection of crime and punishment his last victim, a world authority on Simpering Fever, had reportedly been on the verge of a cure.

The baron looked interested at luncheon when Ganelon mentioned his walk to the top of Mont St. Hugues. "That blasted oak was Grandfather Justin's favorite thinking spot," he said. "By then he'd turned to applied phrenology."

"Changing character by changing the bumps on the head?"

"Quite so. He designed the Sandor Corrective Cap, an iron skull-

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cap with adjustable screws to apply pressure where needed. He wore it himself for three years with nothing for his trouble but bad headaches. Then one night he was surprised by a violent thunderstorm atop Mont St. Hugues. As he stood hurling science's cool defiance into the teeth of wild nature, a bolt of lightning struck. Instantly, Grandfather's headache went away and he realized he must find a solvent to make bone malleable. Many thunderstorms later he hit on pickle brine. For hours he'd soak his head in brine, breathing through a straw, and then work at amending his character with a hefty rubber mallet. He was never successful. Perhaps he needed younger, more mutable bone.

"But by the time I came along he'd abandoned phrenology for pottery. I remember vividly his wild-eyed look when he talked of shaping base clay into splendid little receptacles."

Unwittingly, Sandor had told Ganelon why they never spoke of the pickled boys at home. The Founder suspected Baron Justin was the real killer. So did the young baron's father, who confined Baron Justin in the tower. And Gaston, given the choice of being the madman's keeper for the rest of his life or spending it in a quiet Duranceville cell, confessed to the murders. Ganelon found some satisfaction that the Founder had botched a famous case. But it still left him chasing after a stolen cufflink.

Once again, the table talk was Vieux Gaspard's Ointment. Barking his grim laugh, Gruber promised his shop owners would give the product prominent display or face him on the dueling piste. Hardacre, afraid his countrymen couldn't work their tongues around Vieux Gaspard, proposed a name change for the American market. Oil of the Limberlost, perhaps. Or Calaveras Frog Oil. A hop in every drop.

During dessert the Nawab turned to Ganelon. "After all I said last night about jewels, I find, on reflection, there is one I sorely covet, the Ararat Red, the legendary ruby which illuminated Noah's Ark during the forty dark days and nights of the Flood. It was stolen years ago from the Sultan of Turkey. I understand it may soon be on the market again."

The baron now asked his guests to adjourn to the music room for the parlor game he had promised. Ganelon was so shaken by the Nawab's words, he hardly heard him. The Ararat Red, he knew, was the pride of Dr. Ludwig Fong's fabled collection. Could Fong have used the ruby to hire an assassin to kill the Nawab? And wasn't it said that the Gooseberry Fool had a weakness for precious stones?

Pondering this grim possibility, Ganelon followed the others into the music room. The curtains had been drawn shut and seven armchairs set around the walls at ten-foot intervals. The baroness had taken her place at the piano. Ganelon wondered if the parlor

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game was to be musical chairs. He had been bringing up the rear and found the only chair left was between the baron and Gruber, directly across the room from the Nawab.

The baron cleared his throat and said, "In a moment the servants will take away the lamps and leave us in darkness. Then my wife will begin to play. With the darkness and the music to protect his identity, I beg the one who stole the Nawab's cufflink to return it. Place it in that bowl on the piano and the matter will be closed forever."

Ganelon shook his head firmly and went over and protested in the baron's ear, "I don't like this. The Nawab's life . . ."

"But it was the Nawab who suggested this little bit of entertainment," replied the baron.

His words made Ganelon's resolve stumble. The detective went back and sat down in confusion.

"My dear baron," called the Nawab, who seemed to be enjoying himself, "I hope you're not placing a valuable bowl in harm's way. Major Sowerby knows silver. May he . . . ?"

The baron agreed. Sowerby went and picked up the bowl, turned it over, and judged it a very fine piece.

"Which I am prepared to risk," said the baron.

Suddenly the Nawab's little manservant rushed into the room in considerable distress and whispered to his master. The Nawab smiled, patted his forearm reassuringly, and dismissed him. At the baron's signal the lamps were removed and the baroness began a vigorous polka.

Ganelon sat in the darkness for several minutes contemplating how very close he had come to making a fool of himself. Then he thought of what Father Sylvanus had said. Fool or not, at least he could have the courage of his convictions. Suppose the whole business about the cufflink had been leading up to this dark moment. What if the Gooseberry Fool was in the room?

Ganelon sprang up, stumbled to a window, and threw open the curtains.

The piano stopped. Everyone sat, blinking at the afternoon light. Except for the Nawab. He was quite dead in his chair, his head thrown back, lifeless eyes staring at the ceiling, the mark of the strangler's thumbs on his windpipe.

The baroness uttered a small cry.

Ganelon had failed the Nawab. But he resolved to do everything he could to find his murderer. "Send for the police," he told the baron. He looked around at the guests and added, "No one must leave this room until they arrive." Then he turned to Sowerby. "Can you clarify things, Major?"

Sowerby started to protest. Then the wind went out of him. "I didn't kill him, I swear to that. The Nawab was very embarrassed

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by the baron's fuss over the cufflink. So I proposed this little parlor game. He passed the suggestion on to our host. What his excellency didn't tell the baron was that he was going to give me the remaining cufflink to slip into the bowl. When the lights came back on, there it would be. The baron's honor would be satisfied. The Nawab would get the cufflink back and be no worse off than before."

"So that's what the Nawab's manservant came to tell him, that now the second cufflink was missing?"

"Correct."

Thorwald had gone to the piano. "But the bowl's empty," he said.

"Because you never put it there, did you, Major?" said Ganelon. You palmed the second cufflink. Now you had the pair."

Avoiding everyone's eyes, Sowerby produced the two sapphire cufflinks and handed them to Ganelon, who passed them on to the baron. "Cipriani gave me the first cufflink the morning he left," Sowerby told them. "Said he found it. Said I could return it to the Nawab. Or, he said, I could suggest this little game and end up with both. Somehow he knew I was being pressed hard to repay certain gambling debts. As he pointed out, a matching pair would go a long way to settling things."

"But when the second cufflink went missing, wouldn't the Nawab have suspected you?" asked Hardacre.

"Not if Sowerby killed the Nawab to shut him up," said Gruber.

Sowerby shook his head. "Cipriani had the answer to that one, too. He knew how the Nawab liked his little ethical puzzles. He suggested I cloud the issue by wondering out loud what might happen if the thief actually tried to return the stolen cufflink in the darkness and discovered its mate in the bowl. Might he not consider the second cufflink a reward for his newfound honesty and keep both? This possibility intrigued the Nawab."

Suddenly Ganelon understood the part the perfume atomizer played. Having suggested the parlor game, the master assassin couldn't afford to be there in the room when the Nawab was found dead. So he said his goodbyes and left the château. His plan was to change out of his Cipriani disguise at the railway station and return as Lars Thorwald. But on the way he realized he wouldn't have time to wash off all traces of Cipriani's lavender scent. By dumping the atomizer on the floor of the carriage, he gave himself an excuse for reeking of lavender when he came back as Thorwald.

Here the baroness cried out again. There were faces at the window. Now a commotion broke out in the hallway. The doors flew open and Chief Inspector Flanel burst into the room followed by several of his men. Vain and slow-witted, the chief inspector's rise

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on the police force showed how much it had deteriorated as the Founder's reputation grew and the superior criminal found other places to practice his trade.

Flanel introduced himself to the astonished room. With a nod toward the corpse he said, "An hour ago, the prefecture received an anonymous message that the Nawab of Jamkhandi had been murdered and that his killer was still on these premises."

"Chief Inspector . . ." began Ganelon.

"Ah, young Ganelon," said Flanel. "Letting them get murdered right under your nose, eh? Well, never mind. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut and you may learn something." Flanel turned abruptly and went to examine the body. Then he had the baron explain the chair arrangement and give him the names of the other guests, which he wrote down in his notebook. When he was done he looked much like the cat that had swallowed the canary.

"Chief Inspector . . ." Ganelon began again.

But Flanel lay a side of his forefinger across his lips. Then he addressed the room while pacing back and forth with the plodding, bearlike walk he had affected ever since Marchpane's *The Eye of the Snowstorm,* in which the author had the Founder comment on then Sergeant Flanel's prancing step. "I now intend to interrogate you one at a time, beginning with Herr Franz Gruber. Since this may be a lengthy process, you may all occupy yourselves as you wish until I need to see you. Be warned that I have men at all the entrances and on the grounds." At Flanel's signal the policemen began clearing the room.

Ganelon came over and said firmly, "Chief Inspector, the Nawab's killer is the Gooseberry Fool."

Flanel's jaw sagged.

Ganelon gave him a moment to let that sink in. Then he said, "And the Gooseberry Fool is . . ."

"Not another word," said Flanel, gloating like a peacock. "This is my investigation." Rubbing his hands together vigorously as though washing them in glory, the chief inspector turned to Gruber. "Actually I'm surprised to find you here, Franz Gruber."

"And why is that?" asked the German, clearly outraged at being questioned first.

"Because, sir, yesterday we received a report circulated by the Milan police that your body was found three days ago in a room at the Hotel Europa. You had been strangled and your face battered in. You are an imposter. You are the Gooseberry Fool."

Gruber barked a contemptuous laugh. No amount of badgering could shake the man's pickpocket story. After half an hour Flanel had him taken away to be held until the Leipzig police verified his identity.

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The chief inspector scowled over his suspect list again, shrugged hopelessly, and looked in Ganelon's direction. When Ganelon mouthed Thorwald's name, Flanel had him sent for.

Now a stranger appeared in the doorway, a man with an air of serious purpose wearing a close-cropped beard in the style made popular by Cavour. "I must speak to Baron Sandor," he said.

"I am Chief Inspector Flanel, sir. Who are you?"

"My name is Antonio Cipriani, Vieux Gaspard's sales representative for Italy and Spain."

"How the hell did you get in here?" demanded Flanel.

"I had come expecting villainy," said the new arrival. "When I found men lurking around outside, I assumed they were up to something dark. I should have realized they were police. Villains don't lurk about with their hands in their pockets. In any event, when the man at the front door went into the bushes to relieve himself, I saw my chance and slipped inside.

"A week ago I was kidnapped on my way to visit the baron's new manufacturing facility in Milan and held in an old farmhouse north of Naples. From what my kidnappers said among themselves, I gathered I was being held so that someone could impersonate me here. I suspected the Old Father William people meant to steal our formula." The new arrival struck a kick-boxing stance. "No novice at the art of self-defence, I waited for my chance, knocked one of my captors down with a kick to the solar plexus, and escaped. But what was I to do then? Go to the police and they'd waste precious time confirming my story. So I decided to come directly here. In San Sebastiano I rented a rig, rode out here, and approached the château on foot. The rest you know."

Cipriani put on pince-nez glasses, drew the Friday edition of the Milan *Correro* out of his pocket, and said, "Oh yes, and this may interest you. It seems I wasn't the only Vieux Gaspard representative to be kidnapped." The article he tapped with his glasses read: "The police, acting on an anonymous informant, have determined the murdered man discovered Sunday last at the Hotel Europa and previously identified as Franz Gruber of Leipzig was, in fact, Lars Thorwald of Christiania."

Flanel snatched an invisible fly out of the air and shook it in his tight fist. "Got him!" he said. Then, as footsteps approached down the hall, he turned triumphantly to face the door.

But the policeman sent to find Thorwald had returned alone. "He's gone, sir, escaped from his room down a rope of knotted bed sheets."

"After him!" shouted Flanel, prancing out of the room. "He can't have gotten far! Lars Thorwald is the Gooseberry Fool!"

Ganelon stayed behind to explain to the amazed Cipriani how his identity had been used in the Gooseberry Fool's plan to mur-

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der the Nawab. When he had finished, Cipriani bowed and said, "I come at an inconvenient time. I will return tomorrow to put myself at the baron's disposal."

Ganelon pointed to the window where Flanel and a crowd of shouting policemen were dashing across the lawn. "Don't leave yet. You'll miss all the excitement."

"It looks like they've picked up his trail," said Cipriani. As the pursuers entered the trees he added a worried, "If that's the way the villain went, and he holds to that course, he should emerge from the woods near where I tied my rig." Ganelon made no reply. "But he'll get away!" Cipriani insisted, starting toward the door. "Somebody has to warn the police."

"No need. Thorwald's still here in the château. As for the trail, I saw him fake those footprints this morning. At the time, I thought he was looking for the Phantom Balloon."

"The Phantom Balloon?"

Ganelon sighed. "Please, let us avoid these needless explanations, Mr. Fool. Or may I call you Gooseberry? You are a regular one-man band. First you were one Cipriani, then Thorwald. And now you are another Cipriani, sneaking downstairs like you'd just arrived fresh from the arms of your kidnappers."

The master of disguise gave a resigned smile. Then his eyes turned cold, he shifted his feet, and asked, "What gave me away? After all, if we don't profit from our mistakes, why make them?"

"You'd thought everything through so carefully I knew you'd have a safer escape plan than dropping from a rope of knotted bed sheets into the rubble of an excavated moat and then limping off across country with the police close behind."

The assassin shifted his feet again. "I really am a kickboxing expert, you know. And you, I understand, are a master of the *via felix*, the Happy Way. Or is that your father?"

"You were right the first time. Shall we find out which martial art is the better?"

"I'm tempted. But tell me, does the *via felix* actually change your opponent's character?"

Ganelon nodded. "By redistributing the bodily humors. But the effect is only temporary."

The assassin grimaced. "Then I'm afraid I am your prisoner. Temporary or not, a human chameleon must treasure his own personality, his inner core, above all else."

"Come along, then," ordered Ganelon. "We'll hunt up your rig where you really left it and drive in to the prefecture. I hope we don't meet Chief Inspector Flanel along the way. You are my prisoner. Besides, an afternoon's run in the woods will do his character no end of good." O

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THE COLLUSIONISTS

by Scott Mackay

Neil Fuller sat in his Greenwich Village studio, a delicate October light spilling like cream across his latest watercolor, his Kolinksy sable number 12 poised in his hand, a fresh dab of cadmium yellow on his pallet. His brother, Craig, sat in the old recliner across from him, calm, reflective, self-assured, every bit the old Craig he knew and loved, but now different, now changed, now a man who had just exhaled into the studio the brief and baleful soliloquy of his own confession. Now a man with murder on his lips.

The 1998 Arthur Ellis Award winner in the best short mystery story category, Scott Mackay also has a flair for science fiction writing and has recently concluded a deal with Penguin-Roc for two new SF novels. When writing mysteries, Mr. Mackay often builds his plots around series detective Barry Gilbert. Occasionally, as in his new tale for us, he produces a nonseries piece that is a reflection on crime and morality. ✝

"I thought Barbara killed him," said Neil. "I thought it was all settled."

He wasn't used to visitors this early in the morning. Manhattan sulked outside his window.

"Someone has to know the truth," said Craig. He glanced at Neil's latest painting. "The marsh looks low," he said. "Is it?"

Neil stared at his brother, eleven years his junior, a manager, well-schooled in the world of systems, data links, and networks, responsible, respected, career-minded, in a suit with a gold pen in his pocket, a tie clip to match, a signet fraternity ring from his undergraduate years at MIT.

"It hasn't rained much in the last two years," said Neil. His face felt red. He had that tightness in his throat again, the discomfort he got whenever his blood rushed too quickly—too much red meat, too many fine potables, a connoisseur's eye for exotic flans, cakes, and trifles. And now this. His brother's confession. "The heron's gone," he said. "Did I tell you? She's been gone three years now."

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The air felt thick between them.

"But you have the mallards?" said Craig, nodding at his painting.

"No," said Neil. "The mallards are mine. That corner needed fussing."

Why deliver to him, like an old piece of family furniture nobody wanted, this somber revelation? Not Barbara, but his brother, Craig. Bright, sunny Craig, the man with a smile for everyone. Why tell him about the Wiltshire Staysharp deftly piercing Paul's back?

Craig, looking as if he sensed Neil's perplexity, risked some explanation. "I couldn't let him run off with Christine, could I?" he said.

Neil tried to understand, but he couldn't. He understood the life of the marsh, where the rhythms were gentle, predictable, soothing. He understood the life of his studio, where the north light always stroked a fresh piece of heavy French bond with potential. But he couldn't understand how the courts could possibly indict Barbara Gatt when his brother now told him he had been the one with the Wiltshire Staysharp in his hand, or how Barbara Gatt, knowing the truth, would so amicably stand trial for a crime she hadn't committed.

"Was it really four times?" he asked.

"Sorry?"

"The anchorfools say she stabbed him four times."

"I can't remember," said Craig. "I wasn't counting."

"Her injury," he said, remembering the evidence they had against Barbara Gatt. "The gash on her hand. The blood. The footprints." As if these pitiful tokens might shrink the enormity of Craig's confession.

Craig shook his head. "Paul was a bull," he insisted. "I had to stop him."

Neil felt a beguiling sadness over the death of Paul Gatt. They were, he and Paul, on certain occasions, a pair. Fellow gastronomists. Three hundred pounds apiece. Dressed by the same tailor, with standing reservations at the finest restaurants in Manhattan, a sight to set any waiter's eye twinkling with the anticipation of a generous gratuity. He would miss Paul's artistic acumen, how he so easily understood why Neil had devoted himself with such earnestness to the life of the easel. He would miss how Paul could be so magnanimous with his praise when he saw an exacting bit of brushwork, how, with the insight of an expert, he could say why a practiced line of blue or a quick skim of yellow had captured the *raison d'être* of any particular fish, fowl, or fauna, the epitome of its unseen message, with only a deft stroke or two.

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"But you're not the one in handcuffs," said Neil. "How does Barbara feel?"

"Barbara loves me."

As if love, with all its sacrificial impulses, its dangerous, inexplicable, and destructive urges, could excuse everything, even murder.

He lived in a carefully decorated showpiece of a residence, a Bohemian sanctuary he rented by the square foot from a pair of elderly stockbrokers. He could easily afford it. No self-respecting collector could be without at least one small Fuller. Second and third floors, loft on the third, apartment on the second. A place of fresh roses every day and a Polish cleaning lady twice a week; filled with Chippendale originals and his own modest collection of Constable landscapes; a cultural preserve where the emotions of love, hate, and doubt held no sway. A hermitage where his own inner life of paint, easel, and brush sustained him with a soul-enriching satisfaction. Now rocked like a ship in a gale, the prevailing mood as discordant as one of Schönberg's twelve-tone string quartets, the uncertain outlook as perplexing as any of the single-color canvases of Mark Rothko.

He didn't like to leave his Bohemian sanctuary unless he absolutely had to. Unless it was for an evening out at any of his favorite restaurants, or an afternoon in the galleries, or, if need be, a business meeting with his agent, Valerie Bintcliff. And when circumstance forced him to venture beyond the reach of its golden hardwood floors and handwoven Persian carpets, he never took a taxi, always hired a long dark sedan from a car service. He lived, as his brother once remarked, a cocooned life. And certainly a women's detention center was the last place he ever expected to find himself, especially one as far-flung as the remote hinterland of the Bronx.

But here he was, in a facility as architecturally stimulating as a septic tank, dating from the days of Theodore Roosevelt's bumptious reign in the White House, a cage smelling of ammonia and cream corn, and the fulsome muskiness of too many unwashed women crammed together in a small space.

He sat in the visitors' room and stared through the glass at Barbara Gatt, erstwhile tablemate at Cafe des Artistes, the Rainbow Room, and Da Umberto's, here in the hope that Barbara might tell him Craig's confession was so much bosh. Here to find not only absolution for his brother, but also contradiction. To rediscover in the hoped-for contradiction his own peace of mind, a way to get on with "Mallards on the Marsh," a way to finally bring the confounded fowls alive.

"He had the two sides, didn't he?" said Barbara, speaking of her

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late husband. She was a wisp, with the tawny color of a woman predisposed to melanoma. Inherited. Her mother was end-stage in Ohio. A bad time for Barbara. "You knew him as a curator. As an authenticator of fifteenth-century religious art. I knew him as a husband. As a brute. As a man who wanted to take my child away from me."

Neil admitted familiarity with the theme, the sad leitmotif of divorce in modern times, with the melancholy refrains of custody disputes and restraining orders.

"A persistent man," he said, hoping that would be diplomatic enough. "He took hold of Christine?" he asked.

He dared not enter the forbidden zone of her own culpability.

"Hoisted her like a hundred-pound sack of wheat," Barbara clarified.

"And Craig took the knife to him?"

Her tawny eyes gazed at him as if he were a specimen. "Anthony's advised me against casual disclosure," she said.

Anthony, of course, was her lawyer, a phlegmatic dome-headed man with the complexion of a ghoul and eyes as dark as pitch, the Fuller family lawyer, presented in pinstripes and wingtips to Barbara, by Craig, as the great shining way, the savior who would set her free.

"Craig was a kind boy," he said, feeling he had to defend his brother. "A gentle boy. Always fooling with gadgets. Helped me with my car when I still had the gall to own one."

He hoped these words might coax from her the peace of mind he so ardently wished for. But she smiled fondly in that wispy way of hers, like the Queen of the Fairies.

"He's good with Christine," she said. "He's the only one who knows how to calm her down. He soothes her. He doesn't antagonize her the way Paul did."

And not long after, the guard came and got him. The doubt remained. Who killed Paul Gatt? His brother's confession, now twenty-four hours old, struck him as nothing more than a bad dream, something that couldn't have actually happened, the result of too much jerk sauce on his chicken last night. His brother was made of finer fabric. His brother might argue with Paul Gatt, even lay a diffident hand on Paul's shoulder, but the visceral outcome of Paul's three-hundred-pound corpse exsanguinated on the terra cotta tiles, his hound's-tooth alpaca a ruin, his beard glued and coagulated with blood, struck Neil as so much faulty joinery. The crime didn't fit Craig, and Craig didn't fit the crime.

As he eased his own three-hundred-pound figure into the backseat of his hire car, he desperately tried to convince himself of Craig's finer moral impulses. But doubt made him queasy, and for the first time in years he found he had no appetite.

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He sat at one of the back tables in Le Grenouille, his lamb-in-a-mushroom-and-wine-sauce untouched, his Bordeaux unsipped, and his parboiled new potatoes tested only twice. He was an unlikely sleuth. A miserable sleuth. Yet compelled. Desperate for his brother's exoneration. Anthony Brooks, the Fuller family lawyer, Barbara Gatt's defense attorney, sat across from him in his usual pinstripes, nibbling an endive-and-olive salad.

"He's made the same confession to me," said Brooks, looking up with dark eyes from under the dome of his bald head.

"And do you think it's true?" asked Neil, unable to hide his apprehension.

Brooks stopped nibbling and considered the question. He put his fork down, dabbed his small bloodless lips with his linen napkin, and stared at his wine, as if hoping to divine from its ruby depths an answer he could decode.

"I'm puzzled," he said. "We have the blood, the footprints, the gash on Barbara's hand. We have her daughter's retrograde amnesia. We have the discord, the acrimonious divorce, and Paul's latest custody appeal. We even have Paul attempting to kidnap his own daughter."

This blueprint for murder encouraged Neil. With so much to push Barbara towards that knife, could there be any doubt of her guilt? Why was Brooks so puzzled? Brooks rolled a black olive with his fork, looked underneath it as if he expected to find something there, and put it back in the exact same spot.

"Paul can be exasperating," said Neil.

"Yes, but exasperating enough to murder?"

"Paul can be infuriating," offered Neil.

Brooks looked up, his eyes focusing as if through cross hairs. "Can he?" he asked.

"He expects to be obeyed."

"And he takes what he wants?" suggested Brooks.

Neil nodded. "I'm afraid he does."

"So he hoists the girl over his shoulder, and Barbara resorts to murder. A sober, university-educated woman with no history of violence, no criminal record, a steward of five years' standing with the local Pentecostal, a corporate VP who makes dozens of clear cool-headed decisions every day, and she resorts to murder? And not just the murder of anybody, but the murder of her husband, a man she has loved and respected for the last fifteen years? Just because he's exasperating?"

He was, of course, her defense attorney.

On behalf of Craig, Neil felt compelled to damn Barbara any way he could. "You forget the element of her unfortunate liaison with my brother," he said. He took a distracted sip of his wine,

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hoping to rehabilitate his usual craving for lamb. "One iniquity might lead to another. I can't see Craig lifting a hand against anybody."

"No, of course not," Brooks said quickly, as if to placate Neil. "Craig's not the type. But I find he tried too hard with his confession. I think he might be hoping to protect Barbara with his confession. Or at least attempting to confuse me with it."

This notion, that Craig might be trying to protect Barbara with his confession, tempted Neil. Yet Craig wasn't a particularly adroit dissimulator, always told the truth, always spoke honestly, had never fashioned, so far as Neil could recall, the larger falsehoods necessary for something like his dogged and over-rehearsed confession.

"Someone killed Paul," said Neil, as if that, in itself, were enough to exonerate Craig.

"Barbara's never confessed," said Brooks, as if that, in itself, were enough to exonerate Barbara.

"Yes, but Barbara's a mother," insisted Neil. "She had to protect her child."

Wasn't that motive enough? Might they not consider the unequivocal instinct of a mother, how that instinct might blind a sober, savvy, university-educated woman, how it might let loose the savage impulses that could ultimately lead to a quick grab for the Wiltshire Staysharp?

He conveyed this theory in a jumble of awkward phrases to Brooks, caught himself stuttering a number of times, the old impediment coming back with disquieting suddenness, the bane of his schoolboy years.

"A mother's instinct," mused Brooks, drumming his fingers against the linen tablecloth, still looking doubtful.

"But does that explain the strength?"

Neil pondered this new theme. Strength? Yes, of course, strength.

"Barbara's small, isn't she?" said Brooks.

"A flyweight," agreed Neil.

Brooks lifted his butter knife and positioned the serrated edge upward. "Ever heard of a Turkish thrust?" he asked.

A Turkish bath, Turkish delight, and Turkish tobacco, but never a Turkish thrust. "Enlighten me," he said.

"In a knife fight, the blade is positioned thus," he said, demonstrating with his butter knife. "You plunge the knife point underhanded into your victim's abdomen and yank the blade upward, toward his heart. In this case, the stab wounds in Mr. Gatt's back suggest such a thrust. You have to be strong to make it work. Especially through the back."

He saw Brooks's point. "And Barbara isn't that strong," he admitted.

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A waiter walked by with a dish full of sugared plums and candied figs.

"Have you seen your brother's backhand lately?" asked Brooks.

Craig the athlete. On the pole-vaulting team in high school. Skiing in Colorado every winter. A compulsive jogger. Season tickets to the Knicks. His dresser drawer full of jockstraps. And, of course, tennis. His obsessive quest for the perfect backhand. His Holy Grail.

"I haven't played tennis with Craig in twenty years," he said.

"He has a strong backhand," said Brooks. "His serve is strong. Everything he does with that hand is strong." Neil didn't understand. In one breath, Brooks swore Craig wasn't the type. In the next, he talked of Craig's strong backhand. "I'm not sure my esteemed colleague at the district attorney's office needs to know about Craig's backhand." How was this supposed to settle Neil's doubt? "It's not exactly up to us to tell the D.A. how much Craig's game has improved over the last year, is it?"

Neil looked disconsolately at his lamb, knowing he would never eat it now.

"No," he said. "I suppose it isn't."

He felt hopelessly mired in the ambiguity of the thing. How was he ever going to decide between Barbara's maternal instinct and his brother's strong backhand?

He drew the line at Runamok.

"I'll take Christine for a few days," he said, "but you'll have to kennel the collie."

Craig stood before him, small and well-muscled, with the physique of a GI fresh from boot camp, ready to fly to Ohio, still a pioneer state as far as Neil was concerned, off to make funeral arrangements for Barbara's mother, who'd finally succumbed to her malignant melanoma.

"Christine loves that dog," said Craig.

"And I love my furniture," insisted Neil.

Craig kenneled Runamok. Craig canceled Christine's cello lesson, elocution lesson, swimming lesson, and jazz-dance lesson. He deposited Christine in Neil's teak and marble foyer three days before Neil was to testify as a character witness at Barbara Gatt's trial.

Christine Gatt was tall for a twelve-year-old, rangy and uncoordinated, her dark coarse hair sheared in a pageboy cut. She had big hands, big feet, peach-fuzz on her upper lip, a pimple on her nose. Here was the girl who suffered from retrograde amnesia, who couldn't remember a thing about her father's murder, who couldn't be called upon to testify, who had been ruled an unreliable witness by a court psychiatrist, a ruling currently under

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appeal by Brooks's esteemed colleague at the district attorney's office.

Christine wired a game system to Neil's TV. He sat on his eighteenth-century Georgian loveseat and watched her connect and test with nervous fascination. When the system was ready, she snapped the game disk into the console, grabbed the controls, and sat on the couch. She engaged the game. Something called Jersey Devil. Skipped the animated short at the beginning. Went right to Level One.

A purple imp with rabbit ears, Jersey Devil, walked through the darkened grounds of a museum at night, turning this way and that, prompted by Christine's skilled thumbs, gathering bright pumpkins, popping them like soap bubbles, accruing points.

"So you don't remember a thing," Neil lamely ventured from his perch on the loveseat.

She raised her hand peremptorily. "Don't interrupt," she said. "I've got a mad bomber."

She was right. One of the pumpkins transformed with startling quickness into a caped figure—a mad bomber—and hurled bombs at Jersey Devil. Jersey Devil, with an adroit flicking of Christine's thumbs, fought back, punched the mad bomber once, twice, three times, made the mad bomber explode.

With her opponent destroyed, an odd smile came to Christine's face, one of triumph, her jaw hard, her lips tight, the smile of a girl who believed she was unconquerable. A smile full of vigorous gloating. Full of ego. Much like her father's smile. The smile of a girl who thought she was the center of the universe and would challenge anybody who believed otherwise. She turned to Neil.

"No," she said. "I don't remember a thing."

He let it go. He was a timid man, even with twelve-year-old girls. She deserved to play Jersey Devil without the meddlesome interruptions of an overweight, middle-aged watercolorist, a heart-sick man who wished only to see his brother restored to honor.

Like the mad bomber, he preferred a cape. A cape provided enough protection from the elements and ample ventilation for his corpulent frame. He wore a cape to court.

A character witness. He owed Barbara this much. He removed his glasses on purpose when he climbed into the witness box. He didn't want to see the people. Crowds frightened him. The clerk approached, came into focus, held a Bible in front of him. Owed Barbara this much because she and Craig had become a pair, a couple, a *fait accompli* through his own unfortunate but well-intentioned suggestion that the four of them should dine together. Neil mumbled the necessary oath, watched the clerk recede, grow blurry, disappear. He remembered that night. Neil, Craig, Bar-

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bara, and Paul at a place called Mythos. A forgettable Greek-restaurant-cum-sports-bar in the Flatiron District. Craig ordered shooters: B-52s, Slippery Nipples, and Beam-Me-Up-Scottys. He remembered how the inclinations of Barbara and Craig, one toward the other, had grown like an exotic bloom in the steamy atmosphere of their own covert flirtations; how, in that same dangerous atmosphere, Paul Gatt had been abandoned, or at least sidelined, on the doorstep of his own marriage.

Another figure coalesced in front of him: Anthony Brooks, in his usual pinstripes, the usual bloodless grin on his face.

"Mr. Fuller, can you describe your relationship with Mrs. Gatt?" he said.

He was, after all, a notable artist, a man whose opinion might be worth serious consideration. He cranked out the necessary words. Amicable. Warm. Respectful.

"And the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Gatt?"

At which point Brooks's esteemed colleague from the district attorney's office launched a vociferous objection.

Justice Nash called the two lawyers to the bench. The three cooed like a nest full of doves at dawn. Neil slipped on his glasses and peered around the courtroom. Barbara sat in a simple blue dress at the defense table, looking windblown, all her hair tossed in the same direction, her face red, her tawny eyes again gazing at him as if he were a rare specimen. He couldn't face her. He took off his glasses. Everything grew consolingly blurry. Was she a killer? He couldn't decide. His sad role in these events gnawed. He was the instigator. The doves stopped cooing at the bench.

"Go ahead, Mr. Fuller," said Justice Nash. "Answer the question."

What could he say about the relationship between Paul and Barbara Gatt? He knew how Paul could at times be insufferable. Brilliant but pompous. Generous but conceited. The center of the universe, like his daughter, ready to challenge anybody who threatened the Aristotelian configuration of his own personal cosmos.

"They were good for each other," he mumbled. "They pooled their strengths. They grew with each other."

And then the litany. Loving mother, faithful wife, steward of five years' standing at the local Pentecostal, corporate VP knocking on the glass ceiling, et cetera, et cetera, until Brooks asked a question Neil didn't expect, a puzzling and nerve-jangling question.

"And she's had an affair with your brother how long?"

He tried to hide, to shelter, to disappear into the warm fuzzy ball of his own myopia, but he knew he couldn't. Nor could he fudge the facts, not with Justice Nash staring at him like a kindly

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old grandfather. He couldn't understand the tactic, why Brooks should paint a portrait of Barbara as Our Fair American Everywoman only to slash that portrait with the courtroom equivalent of a Turkish thrust.

"I should think a year," stuttered Neil.

"And considering the nature of what they are to each other, is it not possible your brother might have killed Paul Gatt? Has Craig ever suggested to you or to anybody else that he might have killed Paul Gatt?"

Neil stared. Hadn't they agreed not to talk about Craig's strong backhand? Before he could even begin to formulate a response, the esteemed colleague from the district attorney's office rocketed to the bench. The three conferred again, cooed again, more obstreperously this time, an arcane examination, so far as Neil could interpret, of the difference between a character witness and a hostile witness. The cooing went on for some time. Neil again slipped on his glasses. Glanced at Barbara. She looked happy. How could she be happy? Neil wanted to go home. He perspired, and whenever he perspired he feared people might make remarks about his weight.

"Go ahead, Mr. Fuller," said Justice Nash. "Answer the question."

Neil stared straight ahead. He had an odd taste in his mouth, like camphor, only worse. He had a dizzying sensation in the middle of his head. He remembered the marsh, how, at the age of twenty-two, his third year at art college, he had taken Craig, a boy of eleven, already the best sprinter in school, to see the bulrushes, the beaver hutch, and the great blue heron. Now the water in the marsh was low. Disappearing. The beavers had abandoned their hutch. And the great blue heron was gone. That made him sad. The same way Brooks's question made him sad.

"He told me he killed Paul," said Neil.

Rough words, unpoetic words, but true words. His tongue tripped over the miserably hard consonant four times, sounding like four Turkish thrusts, damning his brother once and for all, letting the world know that Craig had indeed delivered the said quartet of stab wounds with the perfect backhand he was so famous for.

Later, with the girl in her bed and the dishwasher humming in the kitchen, and the anchorfool on the late local news telling the good burghers of Manhattan that the jury would deliberate on Barbara Gatt's guilt or innocence tomorrow, Neil pondered the nature of truth. He wasn't a man predisposed to dyspepsia, yet now he suffered from it constantly. Wondered about his compulsion to tell the truth no matter what the cost. Even a bit of low-cal cottage cheese and caraway seed could rankle his stomach. He questioned the sagacity of his own moral code. He was perplexed

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by the nature of truth. He lifted the TV remote and zapped the anchorfool. Was the truth inviolate, never to be shaped or softened according to need? He wondered how he could so easily savage Barbara's character in front of all those people, then, with a single stuttered sentence, turn his brother into a murderer. Though no longer a practicing Catholic, lapsed in early youth like so many other casualties of the Sexual Revolution, he felt, at least in this case, that he must define himself by one of the New Testament's more famous mythological contexts, that of Judas.

He got up and ambled down the hall toward the loft stairs. He checked the girl.

He was surprised to see her sitting up in bed, the glow from the theater sign across the street lighting her face, her hands clutching her blankets to her collarbones, her dark eyes staring at a wayward maple leaf stuck to the rain-soaked window pane. He had never seen such a woeful child.

"You're not tired?" he asked.

She turned to him, her intelligent but plain face quickly crumbling into an agonized visage of hopelessness, her thick dark eyebrows pinching toward the bridge of her big nose, her lower lip curling toward her chin in a rictus of grief. She began to cry. The bleak and piteous sobs of a twelve-year-old child who had no father, who might lose her mother, whose grandmother had succumbed to malignant melanoma in Ohio. Neil didn't know what to do. What new territory was this? He approached the bed cautiously, keeping his eyes on the sobbing child, afraid she might behave with the unpredictability of a wild animal. What was a temporary parent to do in an emergency like this? He sat on the edge of her bed. He put his hand on her shoulder. He was surprised, even alarmed, when she clung to him. Her sobbing intensified, as miserable and desperate a sound as Neil had ever heard.

"You should try to sleep," he said, not knowing what else to say, putting his arm around her, rocking her. "You'll feel better in the morning."

"I'll never feel better," she said.

Then she cried some more. She pressed her head against his chest. He stared at his Second Empire armoire with carved ivory handles against the wall, wondering what he could say to make her feel better, but finally thought, as the rain came down outside, that he shouldn't say anything at all. No one had ever clung to him like this before. Her girlish muscles squeezed him with bitter strength.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she said. "I'm sorry."

He stopped rocking her. Stopped because it was as if, with this unexpected apology to her father, Christine had given him a magic looking glass; and in that looking glass he at last saw the truth, understood, with a startling and even frightening clarity,

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who, exactly, had killed Paul Gatt. By peering into this looking glass he knew how a young girl like Christine might feel if she were hoisted over her father's shoulder and told she would never see her mother again. He understood her outrage, and the indomitable will of her ego, an ego as strong as her father's. He could easily understand how, carried over Paul's shoulder like that, she might make a grab for the Wiltshire Staysharp on the counter, and how she could readily muster the strength, especially in her terror, to swing low and deep, like Jersey Devil at the mad bomber. Was she not, like her father, a force, with a personality as compelling as a thunderstorm? Was she not, like her father, the center of the universe, and willing to challenge anyone—including her father—who threatened the equilibrium of her own personal cosmos? Not a Turkish thrust at all. In the looking glass, Neil saw overhead thrusts, but overhead thrusts from a girl hanging upside down over her father's capacious back.

In the looking glass, Neil saw a sad little episode of patricide.

Christine's bag sat packed by the door. She waited in Craig's car with Runamok, the dog she loved so much. She was happy because the suppertime anchorfool had told the good burghers of Manhattan in his best anchorfool voice that her mother would be acquitted; the jury couldn't in good conscience hand down a guilty verdict when new evidence, namely Craig's confession, pointed toward another possible suspect. Any doubt was reasonable as far as an American jury was concerned.

Neil and Craig stood in the living room. Neil's TV was just a TV again, not the nocturnal battleground for Jersey Devil and the mad bomber. The bed in the spare room was just a bed again, not the stage for a young girl's remorse. And Craig was just his brother again, kind, affable, sensitive, but still changed, still afflicted, transformed forever by the violent death of another human being.

"And will they go after you?" asked Neil, because he saw this, too, in the looking glass: the reason for Craig's confession, the logic behind Anthony Brooks's court performance, his own surprising role as unwitting collusionist. Saw all the careful but necessary card-stacking Craig, Barbara, and Brooks had craftily undertaken in order to protect Christine.

"All they have is your testimony," said Craig. "And they can't convict me on that. Not when there's so much conflicting evidence. Thanks for looking after Christine. She really likes you."

"She does?"

Craig looked away. "We did it for Christine," he said. "You understand that, don't you?"

Yes, he did. What he didn't understand was how he could have been so obtuse. How he could have been duped.

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"What about the jurisprudence of the thing?" asked Neil, still uncomfortable.

Craig shrugged apologetically. "Christine's going to have her life," he said. "Isn't that jurisprudence enough?"

The calm returned. But it wasn't like the old calm. Neil sat in his studio trying to find that deft stroke or two, the elusive brushwork that would render his family of mallards with the color and form his collectors had come to expect from him. Not like the old calm, because Paul Gatt was dead. He tried a dab of cobalt blue to darken the green, but that just made the drake look like a gander. And never had he seen a gander in the marsh. Putting mallards in the marsh had been a stretch in the first place. He shook his head, his brush poised, and thought of Paul. Nothing would change the terrible but commonplace sequence: he and Craig out with the Gatts, those vulgar shooters, and the simmering inclinations of Craig toward Barbara. Nothing would stop those deadly dominoes from falling: Paul like a bull, his daughter like a Jersey Devil, and the Wiltshire Staysharp like a Turkish thrust.

He put his brush down. He stared at his picture. And he knew he was going to have to start over. He liked the marsh. But the mallards didn't go. He unclamped the watercolor from his easel. He would do the marsh again. But this time he would do it in darker tones. Tones that would capture the hidden meaning of . . . of all this. He pinned a fresh sheet to his easel, the best, Arches 300-lb. hot-press, knowing that doubt would remain an unwelcome guest in his Bohemian sanctuary from now on. He lightly penciled a sketch of the marsh. He raised the water level. But the problem of the empty space in the lower left corner remained. He quickly sketched in the great blue heron. And took solace in knowing that he had at last solved the problem.

The great blue heron, she of the Payne's gray and cerulean blue, had come home to the reeds, lilies, and shallows of the marsh. And in his rendering of the bird, he again found the soul-sustaining satisfaction of a pure and simple labor. Christine Gatt was a killer, Paul Gatt was dead, and Craig would remain forever changed. But at least in his own inner world, the world of the studio, where the rhythms of life were slow, measured, and certain, and potential found its form in the soft illumination of the north light, he could weather any gale, sweeten discord to harmony, and carry his new doubt not as a personal sorrow but as a way to better understand his *own* personal cosmos. ●

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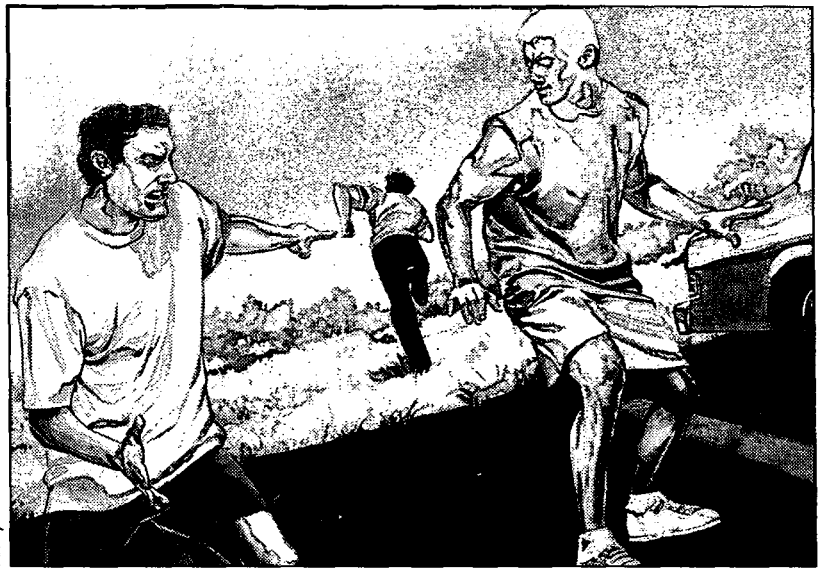

Art by Mark Evans

WHATEVER IT TAKES

by Benjamin M. Schutz

"Wake up, Sean, Mickey called. We've got work."

His brother, Matthew, prodded him with a toe.

"You need a shower, too. You've still got paint in your hair."

Sean Ellis grunted but didn't move. He entered each day with the ease of a twelve-pound breech birth.

"You better get a move on. I'm not waiting. I'll take all the work myself."

"Like hell you will." He rolled over, swung his legs over the side, and followed his brother out of the bedroom. He went into the shower and watched his brother go into the kitchen.

Matthew Ellis opened the refrigerator and took out two bagels and a block of cream cheese. Dropping a bagel into the toaster, he reached up and got down two coffee mugs and poured a cup for himself and one for his brother. He carried his cup, milked and sugared, into the living room.

His mother lay asleep on the sofa. Matthew walked around the living room chairs and turned off the television. More and more

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often he found her asleep in her clothes in the living room, as if she had only enough energy to get inside the front door.

Chris Ellis was a petite woman, barely over a hundred pounds. Her son thought she was slipping from lean to frail but hoped that he was wrong. Her blanket had slipped down to her waist and her book was open on her chest.

He sipped his coffee and looked at himself in the mirror over the sofa. Stocky and muscular, he was dressed in khaki shorts and a dark blue T-shirt from his stint at the medical examiner's office. Across his chest ran the unofficial motto of that office:

Homicide?
Suicide?
I decide.

He looked down at his mother's tiny fists, clenched in her sleep like a baby's. Her thumbs were tucked inside her fingers. He wondered if she had been fighting in her sleep and hoped that she had won. He wanted to cover them but knew that if he adjusted her blanket, she'd startle and waken.

The phone in the kitchen rang and he rushed to answer it.

"Hello," he said.

"Matthew, boy. Is that you?"

"Yeah. Who is this?"

"It's your dad. Don't you recognize my voice?"

He did, but denied it so that his father would have to identify himself. Every little bit of distance helped. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to see you and your brother. Talk about things. See where we stand."

"Not a chance. You made your choices, now live with them. We sure as hell had to."

"Look, Matt, I know you're angry . . ."

"Angry? I'm homicidal, you bastard."

"Put your brother on."

"Sorry, I can't hear you. You seem to be breaking up."

He hung up the phone and began to massage his temples with his fingertips.

"What's up, Matt?" his brother asked as he walked into the kitchen.

Edgar Award winner Benjamin M. Schutz described his latest story for us this way: "It is a day in the life of two young private eye/process servers—Hardy Boys for the nineties. It is the product of a summer listening to my sons, two young private eye/process servers, learn how the real world operates as the bearers of bad tidings." †

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"What else? That was Dad with his Monday-morning overture. Let's talk, boys, let's start over, let's forget everything that happened. I'm a changed man. I've found Jesus." He squeezed his eyes shut and began to use his palms. "I get such a headache talking to him. You gotta take the next one, man."

"Whatever." He fixed his coffee, handed Matt the bagel from the toaster, and put one in for himself.

He was as long, lean, and fair as his brother was short, wide, and dark. Like his brother, he'd dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. August around D.C. made anything else unbearable without air conditioning.

"Sean, let me ask you a question."

"Okay."

"Have you noticed how gray Mom is getting? She's only forty. Do you think stress can do that to you?"

"I don't know, man. I'm the art major, remember. I didn't take psychology."

They ate in silence, washed their cups and plates, stacked them to dry, and turned out the lights before they left the apartment. Matt stood by the door, his hand on the light switch, looking at his mother's shape on the sofa.

"You know, Sean, when I was little, I thought the worst times of my life were those nights Mom came home with a date. I was wrong. I'd give anything for her to come home with somebody now. She doesn't even use the bed for herself anymore."

"Let it be, Matt. We've got work to do."

Their ten-year-old Subaru had all the pickup of a pair of drunken oxen. Like their previous car, they had bought it at an auction for less than a hundred bucks, planned to drive it till it stopped and then get another one. Maintenance had no place in their plans. It was just delaying the inevitable. Like a respirator or a feeding tube. Besides, it cost money.

Mickey Sloan's office was tidy and well organized. He had a sofa along one wall for his field agents to sit on and read the papers they were going out to serve. He sat facing them inside a U-shaped desk. His desk phone had five lines. A missed call was a job lost and so he carried a cell phone and a pager with him at all times. A copy machine sat on top of a wall of file cabinets. On the opposite wall, next to the window, was a large map of the metropolitan region. Through the blinds, Mickey could see the courthouse across the street; a giant paper factory, without any smokestacks. His computer screen had a screen-saver design of a bearded caveman with a piece of paper in his hands, trotting forever across a barren landscape.

Matt and Sean came in, took their packets off of Mickey's desk, and sat down to read their day's work.

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First up was a Notice of Judgment against Mohammed Ben Zekri out in Herndon, then a witness subpoena for Vu Tran Nguyen in Falls Church. Vu had seen an automobile accident. Lorelei Petty was going to get a notice of deposition in the divorce case of Truman and Molly Wing. She was going to be asked about her affair in excruciating detail. Truman's attorney had a very limited imagination, and the mechanics of lesbian love had to be repeated over and over before he got it. A restraining order was today's bit of sunshine for Gustavo Martin, courtesy of his girlfriend Mirabella Montoya of the bloodied nose and chipped-tooth Montoyas. Last but not least was a subpoena duces tecum for the records of Lowell Gorman, DDS, pioneer in the use of anesthetic-shrouded sex as a dental procedure.

"How much for these, Mickey?"

"Ben Zekri, Nguyen, and Petty are twenty-five each; Gorman is thirty, and Martin is fifty."

"Anything special we should know?"

"Watch out for Martin. Serve him together. This isn't the first girl he's slapped around. He's out on bond and looking at some time inside for this one. He won't be in a good mood when you find him."

Mickey cleared his throat. "Uh, I've got a piece of bad news for you guys. You know that case you've been working on for Barton and Hammon?"

"Yeah," they said, drawing the syllable out slowly. They had been working for days to find a way to serve Byron Putnam, who oscillated between his gated condominium in McLean and a security office building on K Street. He was now worth $4.00 an hour and sinking fast.

"They want it back. They know you've had trouble getting to Putnam. There's another agency that says they can get into his building."

"Who?" Matt asked.

"Amanda Marshall."

"Right. She thinks one of her ho's in hot pants and a halter is gonna do the job."

"Yep."

The boys shook their heads. "She's probably right," Sean said. "The gimp at the gate will go brain dead, drool down her cleavage, and the chemical reaction will make her invisible. I remember reading about that."

"Hey, I'm sorry. I know you guys put a lot of time on that one, but they're the clients. They can take the paper back."

"Fine, fine. It's out in the car. We'll drop it by their office later today. Any more good news?" Sean muttered.

"No. That's it."

"How about letting us into the 'Icebox.' We've been here almost

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three months already. You know we can do the job. How about it?" Matt asked.

Mickey mulled it over. They were leaving soon to go back to school. He wanted to hold it out as a carrot to get them to come back over the Christmas break. On the other hand, they were reliable and hard-working. Maybe a taste of bigger things now would whet their appetite. Christmas gifts could run into beaucoup dollars.

"All right. Here's the rules. The Icebox has papers we haven't been able to serve. They may not even be valid anymore. You'll have to check with the lawyer and the client to see if they still want them served. If they do, and you're successful, you keep all the money. So check with the attorney on that, too; some are worth more than others. But it's strictly a sideline—something you do after you hit the current jobs. I like keeping that box small. That means we tag all the fresh ones. Understood?"

"Understood."

Sean took the box down and sat it on his lap. Matt leaned over as they thumbed through the papers. They were filed alphabetically.

"We'll come back when we're done today and research these, see which ones we want to pursue," Sean said.

"Good hunting. You better hit the streets. One last word about the Icebox, even though I don't think you need it. One reason I don't let everybody in there is because of the risk of sewer service."

"What?"

"Sewer service. I once had a guy claim he'd served a paper when he'd flushed it down the toilet. He figured we couldn't find the guy so he wasn't gonna show. Easy money. Well, we couldn't find him because he was dead. That came up at the hearing. Not a shining moment. I got a reprimand and he got sixty days. My reputation rides along with you two every day, but hey, I don't need to say that, that's why I'm letting you into the Icebox."

Mickey's office was in one of the faux-colonial buildings that ring the courthouse and public-safety building. They took 66 West from there to the parkway, then across the county over the Dulles access road into Herndon. Matt drove and his brother navigated.

"Right here, Matt, into this development. Take the first left and go straight to the end."

"Where do we stand, Sean?"

"You're up thirty-five. I figured to take two of the twenty-fives and the doctor. You take the other two and we're even."

"All right. This one's yours."

They drove past a row of McMansions, five hundred thousand dollar pseudo-Georgians so close together you'd have to mow on alternate days, looking for house numbers painted on the curb. Sean began to count by twos and started to shake his head. The

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houses came to a halt just short of the address for Mohammed Ben Zekri. They pulled up to the curb and looked at the hole in the ground, awaiting a foundation. Mr. Ben Zekri was gone along with ten thousand cubic feet of dirt.

Matt got out of the car and walked over to the last house and headed up the stairs to the front door. Sean pulled out the cell phone, looked at the signature page on the notice, and called the attorney.

"Klompus, Bogans, and Hess. How may I help you?"

"Jack Klompus, please."

"Who may I say is calling?"

"Sean Ellis of AAA Process Service."

"This is Linda, Mr. Klompus's secretary. How may I help you?"

"I'm here at the address your office provided for Mohammed Ben Zekri and what it is is a hole in the ground."

Matt stood next to him and mouthed. "Empty for six months."

"In fact, it's been a hole in the ground for six months. We'd appreciate it if Mr. Klompus could check his file and see if he has a more current address for Mr. Ben Zekri."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Klompus is on vacation. I'll leave a message for him. His assistant will call you back."

"Thank you."

Sean put the phone back in his pocket. "You know, for three hundred dollars an hour, they could check their addresses every six months. That wouldn't be too much to ask, would it?"

They got back in the car and plotted a course to the next address, a red-brick apartment box in Falls Church, on the edge of "Little Saigon." There was no grass on the lawn, only dirt, rocks, and glass. The one tree was long dead. A number of windows had broken panes. The chain-link fence lacked only a razor-wire frosting to complete the detention-center look of the place. The boys walked through the graffitied door and looked at the mailboxes. There wasn't a name on a single one.

"You take the top floor and work down. I'll go up," Matt said.

They met on the second floor at the only door that was opened to them. Inside was an elderly Vietnamese woman, her streaked gray hair pulled into a tight bun. She had a young child on her hip and two others behind her. All three children were in diapers with fingers in their mouths.

"Uh, ma'am, we're looking for Mr. Vu Tran Nguyen. Can you tell us what apartment is his?" Sean asked.

Her face was utterly impassive, an appropriate reaction when assailed by gibberish.

Sean proceeded, "Do you speak English?"

Nothing.

"I thought so. So if I tell you I'm going to rip this child out of

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your arms and eat him, your eyes won't widen and you won't slam the door in my face, will you? Of course not, and so you haven't. Have a nice day. Welcome to America."

They turned away and trotted down the stairs. "Didn't I tell you to take Vietnamese as your foreign-language elective, Matt? No, you had to take French. Have you noticed any place called 'Little Paris' around here?"

"Let me think. No, I don't think so."

"Me neither. Who's next?"

"Lorelei Petty over in McLean. Good bet she speaks English."

"Lucky you, Matt."

They drove slowly through Falls Church towards Tysons Corner and McLean. Tysons Corner was the largest commercial center in America not located in the heart of a city. Falls Church sat between Washington D.C. and Tysons, and its one main thoroughfare was always distended with traffic, a perpetual aneurysm.

Forty-five minutes later they pulled up in front of Lorelei Petty's townhouse on the Tysons-McLean frontier, where the proper zip code could mean a twenty thousand dollar difference from the other side of the street.

Matt read the paper. "This is a notice of deposition, so the shit's been hitting the fan for quite a while. We don't have the advantage of surprise here."

"So, call her. See if she's here. Do we have a description?"

"Yeah, five feet six inches, hundred forty-five pounds, light brown hair, wears glasses."

Matt dialed directory assistance, got the number for an L. Petty, and then dialed that.

"Hello?"

"Lorelei Petty?"

"Yes."

"Hi, my name is Matt Ellis. I'm a process server. I have a subpoena for you in the Wings matter. I'm on my way over. I'll be there in about twenty minutes, is that okay with you?"

"Uh, sure, whatever."

Matt set the phone down. "What do you think, Sean?"

"A guy, he'd be outa there three minutes tops. A woman, I'd say six."

They looked down at their watches. The adjacent townhouse had a contractor's sign hung from the front porch railing. It proclaimed: "Another fine project from the master craftsmen at DNT Contractors. Call Burle Hitchens at (703) 555-9400."

Five minutes later, Matt rolled up the paper, stuck it in his back pocket, and got out of the car. He was going up the stairs when the front door opened. A woman stepped out and turned back to lock the deadbolt. Matt closed ground.

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"Lorelei, is that you?" he asked, eagerly but uncertain.

"Yes," she said and turned to face her caller.

Matt whipped out the papers and handed them to her.

"You've been served, ma'am."

She backed away, waving her hands at the paper like it was an angry insect.

"No, I haven't. I haven't taken these."

"That's TV, ma'am. You answered to the name, you match the description, you live at the right address. You've been served."

Matt dropped them at her feet. "I'd advise you to read them and call a lawyer. Have a nice day."

"I hope your dick falls off, you miserable little bastard."

"Duly noted, ma'am, and my affidavit of service will include your kind words."

Matt jumped into the car and it pulled away. "What next?" he asked.

"Our Latino lady-killer, over in Arlington."

"Where are we serving him?"

"Work. He's a janitor at a motel in Arlington."

Their cell phone rang.

"Hello?" Sean said.

"Sean, is that you? It's Chuck Pruitt. You and your brother want to do some surveillance?"

"Hold on, Chuck, I'll ask him."

He covered the mouthpiece, "Matt, it's Chuck Pruitt, he wants us to do surveillance. What do you say?"

"I say no. He hasn't paid us for our last two jobs. Working for him is working for free. It's been over two months he's owed us."

"You sure? It's work."

"Work? It's charity. Slow pay is no pay. You can do it. I'll pass."

"Uh, Chuck, we'll pass. You still owe us about two hundred and fifty bucks for work we did in May."

"Hey, guys, it's not me. I bill the clients. I've gotta chase them to pay me so I can pay you. Every check I get that you're owed a piece of, I pass it straight on."

"Chuck, I'm not saying you're stiffing us. But none of this is gonna pay my tuition bill. Summer's almost over. I need money now. The school could give a damn. It's due when it's due. Sorry."

"I hate being the asshole of the food chain. The pâté's at the other end, down here it's all bullshit," Sean snapped.

"Well, we've got two more chances for today. Let's make 'em count."

Gustavo Martin was a janitor at the Arlington Inn, which operated on the same principle as its neighbor the Pentagon: Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

"You take the front desk, Matt. I'll find a maid, see if she knows

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where he is."

"Wait for me if you find him. He might think twice about going off."

"Sure." They exited the car, Matt going to the office, Sean heading upstairs where he had seen a maid's cart in the hallway. He went up the stairs three at a time, grabbed the rusting metal railing, and swung up and around onto the second floor. The ice machine had its bin door open and a sign taped to the front that said Broken. He walked down to the maid's cart and looked into the room it was parked outside of.

"Excuse me, can I talk to you?" he said into the darkened room.

"¿Sí, quién es?" a woman replied. She was bent over, making the bed.

"¿Dónde está Gustavo Martin?"

"No entiendes ni jota."

"I know he works here. Just tell me where he is?"

"He's around. I don't know."

"Okay. What does he look like?"

"He's short, curly black hair, moustache . . ."

As she spoke, her words coalesced in the space at the end of the hall. The man looked at Sean, saw him take a step towards him, turned, and started down the stairs. Sean leaned over the railing and saw his brother step out of the motel office.

"That's him, Matt."

Glancing over his shoulder at his second pursuer, the man ran across the parking lot towards the high grass along the railroad tracks. There were no trains in sight. He would have to run all the way to El Salvador. Matt took off after him. The guy was windmilling his arms through the high grass, bobbing back and forth above his churning bowlegs. Matt had no speed to speak of, but he and his brother ran five miles a night through their neighborhood. The longer Gustavo ran, the better Matt's chances of catching him. He heard the slap of footsteps behind him, each one louder than the last. He came out on the dusty path alongside the tracks.

"Hold on, Matt. I'm coming." Sean ate up ground, each stride longer and faster than those of either of the others.

Committed to a sprint, Matt accelerated. Even if he didn't catch Martin, he'd make him run flat-out to escape him, and then watch his brother run him down, even if it took ten miles.

Matt figured Martin for a chain-smoking couch potato who'd smack Mirabella if she didn't get him a Dos Equis with each trip to the kitchen. Four hundred yards in his boots with their two-inch heels and he was doubled over, holding his side and gasping for breath.

Matt and Sean slowed down and approached him.

"Gustavo Martin?"

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"No. Yo soy Carlos Gonzalez."

"Bullshit. We've got something for you, Mr. Martin." Matt reached for the papers in his pants pocket.

"No, no." Gonzalez spun towards them, his hand digging into his pocket.

"Oh shit," they both thought. It had to happen. Someday they'd serve someone with a gun. Sean leaped with both arms outstretched to pin the man's hands in his pants. His brother stepped up behind him, planted his feet, and threw a right hand that hit Gonzalez flush on the chin. Helped by the weight of the other boy on his chest, he slammed backwards into the earth and lay still. Sean grabbed the man's hand and pulled it out. He was clutching a wallet. While Sean squatted and flipped through it, Matt patted the man down. He had a six-inch switchblade in his right back pocket.

Sean handed him the wallet. "Woops."

All the cards read "Carlos Gonzalez." He too was short, moustachioed, with curly black hair. They tucked the wallet back into his pants and pulled him away from the tracks.

Gonzalez came around in a couple of minutes. Sean said, "We're sorry, Mr. Gonzalez. We were looking for Gustavo Martin."

"Yo soy Carlos Gonzalez."

"We believe you. Why'd you run?"

No reply.

"Le cremos. Porqué corrio?"

He pointed at Matt's shirt. *"¿Policía?"*

"No. No policía."

"¿Sos de la Migra?"

"No. No Immigration."

Gonzalez stood up, rubbing his jaw.

"Sorry about that. I thought you were going for a gun. *Uh, perdone me, pense que usted buscaba una pistola."*

"No, si tuviera una pistola les hubiera pegado un balazo." Gonzalez imitated shooting them both.

"I'm sure you would have," Sean replied. "No guns. No INS. Why don't we call it a draw and all go away happy."

They walked away and left him there rubbing his jaw.

"Why are we doing this, Matt? Run it by me one more time."

"Because the chicks love it. We're dangerous men. We're hard and shifty. Men to be reckoned with."

"Thanks. It's all coming back now. I must have lost it when I was shitting myself back there, and by the way, don't wear that shirt again. We're not the Hardy boys. I don't want to die in a hail of irony, gunned down by some ESL dropout."

"No problem. It's history."

"And we still have to find Gustavo Martin."

"Not today. We'll get his home address and try him there."

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"This doctor, did you arrange to serve him?"

"Called his office, set up an appointment for four o'clock. Should be a piece of cake."

"With a ground-glass crust. Let's do it."

Dr. Gorman's office was in Tysons Corner, a three-story box of solo practitioners: doctors, dentists, accountants, architects, insurance salesmen, and an individual who advertised himself as a Failure Analyst.

"That's the best job title I've ever seen. You make a living analyzing other people's screwups. How do you train for that? What was his major?" Matt mused.

"We can ask on the way out. You go on ahead. I've got to take a leak," Sean said and ducked into the men's room.

When Sean entered Dr. Gorman's office, there were four other people in the waiting room. It was a battleship grey, with tubular metal chairs arranged around the edges of a purple carpet flecked with white. A central coffee table had a green flowerless plant and a pile of worn magazines.

"Dr. Gorman, please. I've got some papers for him," Sean said.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Gorman isn't here," the secretary said, closing her appointment book. She sat behind a sliding-glass panel in the wall, next to an unmarked door.

"What about all these people?"

"We have another doctor covering for him today."

"Really? I called to set up this appointment. I was told he'd be here."

"I'm sorry, who are you with?"

"Short Fuse Process Service. How about I leave this with you, Ms. . . .?"

"Not a chance. I'm not authorized to accept service and I'm not taking it. You get out of here or I'll call the police." The last part she whispered fiercely.

"Okay. I'll go, but you tell Dr. Gorman I'm going to his house next. I know he's got a teenage daughter. She should be home soon from school. I'll serve her. She'll love reading this stuff."

"Get out of here, you despicable piece of . . ."

"Don't say it. You'll piss me off. Right now this is just a job. Don't make it personal."

He pulled the door closed behind him. As soon as it settled, the secretary pushed a button on her phone and whispered into the mouthpiece as she pulled the glass panel closed. A bald man with a precisely shaped beard and half-glasses near the end of his nose came up from the back office. They spoke briefly. He grimaced and shook his head at each thing she said. A patient, his hand to his jaw, approached the window and rapped on the glass. The secre-

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tary slid it back.

"Excuse me, Dr. Gorman, how long a wait do you think it's gonna be. My tooth is killing me," he mumbled.

"I don't know, I'm running a little behind today," he snapped irritably.

The patient smiled at this, reached through the opening with the hand he'd held to his face, and dropped a folded piece of paper onto the desk.

"Dr. Gorman, you've been served." The secretary opened her mouth. He pointed at her. "Don't say a word. If you hadn't lied to us, we wouldn't have lied to you. Have a nice day."

Matt left the doctor's office and headed to the elevator. He pushed the Down button and the doors opened. Sean was leaning against the far wall. They both raised their arms and slapped palms. Sean started to sing, "Nowhere to run to, baby, nowhere to hide."

"Short Fuse Process Service. That was good. You make that up on the spot?"

"Yeah, she was pissing me off. If she'd gotten the doctor or agreed to accept it, I'd just have asked you for the paper. Once she started that bull, I just ad-libbed it and hoped you'd find a place to step in. If not, I figured we'd stake out his house."

"Does he have a daughter?"

"Hell if I know. I was on a roll."

"That got my attention. I wasn't so sure I wanted to serve the daughter. This is ugly stuff. She didn't do anything."

"Hey, whatever it takes, Matt. Nobody cares about stiffing us."

"What is that, our motto? Short Fuse Process Service: Whatever it takes."

"Sure, why not?"

Matt shook his head. "Yeah, why not? We're young. We're hard-core."

"Let's go back to the office, file the paperwork, and look at the Icebox. Have you figured out how much we've made? Tuition's due at the end of August, we've only got a week left," Sean said.

"Yeah, I've checked. We're short. We'll need to take everything we can get. Night jobs, the weekend. If we don't make it, we can see if they'll put us on the monthly plan, that'll give us some more time to come up with the balance."

"You know, for white male oppressors, we're not having a lot of fun running this country."

"Our turn will come. Until then, we go home, grab a bite to eat, and go to the gym. The state bench-press meet is Thanksgiving. If we're going to have any chance, we can't let our training slack."

"What if we get a call at the gym?"

"We go. And we bitch the whole way. That's why we're Short Fuse, remember?"

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They sat in Mickey's office and filled out affidavits of service and billing sheets for the day. Each one rummaged through the Icebox as the other recorded his work. Mickey double-checked the forms and countersigned them. "Find anything?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Yeah. One," Sean said.

"Who is it? Let me see."

Sean handed him the papers.

"I remember this guy. A deadbeat dad. You guys'll love tagging him. Good hunting. Remember, call the attorney first, make sure it's still valid and what they'll pay. Get it in writing and see if they'll pick up your expenses. Remember when you had to eat that all-day parking bill? See you tomorrow."

Sean took the papers back, nodded to Mickey, and the brothers left his office. In the car, Sean pointed to the case citation.

"See that. Chelsea Lyn Dougan v. Burle Hitchens."

"Yeah, so what?"

"I saw that name today. On a sign. It was the house next to Lorelei Petty. The contractor's sign. He was remodeling the house. It said 'Burle Hitchens'; it even had a phone number."

"That's crazy. If this guy was doing business openly in this county, Mickey would have found him. DBA's, corporation lists. That's the first thing he does."

"Maybe he wasn't working back then. Time passed, he got more confident, used his name, no one came after him."

"Or it isn't the right guy. Same name, wrong guy. We already tagged the wrong man once today. That's plenty."

"Two Burle Hitchens? Maybe. We'll check it out tomorrow at the courthouse."

"What do you think we can get for this?"

"The original fee was two hundred. All for us. It may be worth more now."

"That would be sweet."

They pulled into their apartment complex, hurried by the pool they rarely had time to visit, and bounded up the stairs of their building. The apartment was empty when they entered. Their mother had left a note on the refrigerator: "I'm working the late shift. It's a favor for Marge. I owe her one. Don't worry about me. It'll be fine. Love, Mom."

"Look at this, Matt," Sean said, handing his brother the note.

"Don't worry, my ass. When will she get off?"

"Eleven."

"We're going over."

"Matt, they have escorts now."

"I don't care."

"Hey, okay. I'm not arguing with you."

Their mother's parking-lot rape four years earlier at the hospi-

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tal was never far from either of their minds. Nor the fact that her attacker was never caught.

"Let's change and go to the gym. We can come back and eat later," Matt said.

"What's the rush?"

"Might be some chicks we can impress. I mean, we almost got shot, right?" he joked.

They impressed no one that evening. Matt put up 315 at a body weight of 162. His brother, with his longer arms, did 245 at the same weight. The only women in the gym were a couple of Spandex-encased Barbies being fondled between reps by their Kens, and a bodybuilder who outweighed them by fifty pounds. At eleven they were in the hospital parking lot where they could watch their mother leave the emergency-room staff exit and walk all the way to her car. She'd never have let them come to pick her up, saying they couldn't run over to protect her all the time; she had to be able to go to work; that's why they have the escort service. And they'd never rely on anyone else. So she wrote them notes and admonitions that they silently ignored. If she ever saw them in the shadows, she never said.

Matt was profoundly agitated at these times, a small part of himself wanting someone to try and accost her, to give him the reason to release four years of fury. He imagined that there'd be nothing but melted steel around a crater where he and the attacker had both vaporized.

They recognized her escort as Lucius Weems and watched them go to her car. Matt waited for her to back out and head for the exit as Sean swung by in the Subaru. He jumped in, and they left by another exit and were home, watching *Wild Things,* nodding in solemn agreement that Denise Richards was the hottest woman they'd ever seen, when they heard her key in the door.

The next morning, they were on the phone at nine to the law office of Joe Anthony, who told them that the Motion for Judgment was still valid. They had served papers for other cases Anthony had handled.

"Do you know where this guy is?" he asked.

Matt said, "No. We're just cleaning house for Mickey. Toss out the ones that aren't servable, get updates on whatever we haven't served yet. We're still looking; we want to be the ones to get this guy."

"Well, you better get on it. The statute of limitations is running out on this one."

"When does that happen?"

"End of the month. If you don't find him, he walks away scot-free on this."

"What does that mean?"

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"He hasn't paid child support in ten years. With interest, he owes his ex-wife over a hundred thousand dollars. This is an out-of-state case. The judgment was in Louisiana. They've got a statute of limitations of ten years. Even with the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act, Virginia can't enforce an out-of-state judgment after ten years. So he gets to give his wife, his kids, and the state of Louisiana the finger. That's what it means. The paper you have is a Motion for Judgment. It has its own clock, a year. Once we filed that, it stopped the clock on the statute of limitations, but if we don't serve him in a year, then the wife's suit is dismissed and his clock starts up again. Our year is up in a week. I could nonsuit the case and refile it in six months, but his ten years is up in two weeks, so there'd be no point. It's now or never."

"What if he gets served and runs again?"

"That's the biggest problem. You find him, we have to keep an eye on him until we get into court. He has twenty-one days to file a reply. In that time he can liquidate his assets and flee. We go into court, we win the legal battle. But it means nothing. She doesn't get a cent. What I'd love to do is have you serve him, then go get an ABJ on him. I could file that on any motions day."

"What's an ABJ?" Matt asked.

"Attachment before Judgment. If I could go in and show he was a flight risk, I could get the court to attach all his assets immediately, so even if he goes, all his money stays here. It might not cover all he owes, but it's a start."

"What do you need for that?"

"Evidence that he would not honor the notice of suit. See, this guy hasn't been served yet, you haven't been able to find him, so I can't argue that. That's why we'd need to keep him under surveillance. So we'd know where he went if he ran, and he will. If you boys did the surveillance, what would it cost?"

"Uh, we're twenty-five dollars an hour each, plus expenses. If we did it in shifts, that'd be six hundred dollars a day for three weeks, uh, twelve thousand, six hundred dollars." Matt was woozy just saying the number. He wrote it on a pad for Sean to see.

"My client can't afford that."

"Well, we could only do it for a week. We've got to go back to school."

Sean shook his head and grabbed the paper. He wrote, "I'll go back late. My friends'll cover for me. This is too good to pass up."

"That's still four grand. She can't afford that. If she could, we wouldn't be chasing him."

"We have a deal with Mickey. On these old papers, if we can serve them we get to keep all the money. How much was he getting for this one?"

"Because of the amount of money at stake, he was getting two

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hundred for the paper. That would have been a hundred for you. I'll tell you what, since we're almost out of time. If you find this guy, it's worth five hundred dollars, all to you."

"How about our expenses?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Money to informants, stuff like that."

"Up to a hundred dollars, with an invoice."

"Okay, we've got a deal. We'll send you a letter to confirm this."

"Good luck, guys, you're running out of time."

"Is there any information you can give us on this guy? A description, work history."

"Yeah, he's a big guy, about six feet, over two hundred pounds. White, brown hair, brown eyes. Anything other than that would be ten years old. He was a custom builder back in Louisiana. There was a significant discrepancy between his declared income and what his clients said they paid him, as I recall from the filings. That was a big issue in establishing the child support. He was getting paid in cash a lot. I'll check the file, see if we have anything else that would be useful. If I come up with anything, how do I get in touch with you?"

Matt gave him the cell-phone number. "It's on all the time."

He hung up the phone and pumped his fists. "Yes. Five hundred and a hundred for expenses."

"Let's go to the courthouse and see what they have on this guy. It's like you said, he had to be in hiding until recently or Mickey'd have found him," Sean said.

They grabbed their jackets and line-danced out of the apartment, singing, "Nowhere to run to, baby, nowhere to hide."

Matt said, "If that's our theme song, we ought to find out whose song it is."

Their mother rolled over in bed, her arms clasped across her chest, her fists under her chin, and said, "Martha and the Vandellas. Good luck, boys," as she heard the door quietly close.

Two hours later they sat in the cafeteria of the Fairfax County Circuit Court building, reviewing their notes. They had a home address and phone, office address and phone, and state corporation filings for the last two years for Burle Hitchens and DNT Contracting.

"This makes no sense. He hasn't been hiding. We should have found him first time out of the box a year ago."

"Who cares, Matt. Whoever Mickey gave this to didn't. They screwed up and it's our good fortune. Let's call him, make sure he's at the job site or at his office, and go pay him a visit. Easiest five hundred bucks we've ever earned."

In the car they dialed DNT's office number from the sign.

"DNT Contracting."

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"Is this Burle Hitchens?"

"Who's calling?"

"My name is Sean Ellis. I saw your sign on a house in my neighborhood. I'm thinking about adding a deck onto the back of my house, maybe making it a covered porch. I was wondering if I could talk to you about the job."

"Sure. Why don't you come by the office. I'll show you some pictures of other projects we've done."

"Great. What's the address?"

Hitchens gave it to them and they hung up. His office was in his house, on Route 123 down near Lorton, Washington D.C.'s prison. They pulled into the dirt driveway and parked next to a white pickup truck. The house had a wide, raised front porch that ran across the front, supported by columns at the corners. It was a white wooden salt-box with dormers on the second floor. The windows were open, and gauzy white curtains billowed with the breeze. The backyard had a chain-link fence with a 'Beware of Dog' sign. The truck had a bumper sticker that read, "White men can't jump. We don't have to. We hire black men to do that."

"I'm gonna love tagging this guy," Matt said.

"You want to do it?" Sean asked.

"I don't care. We're splitting the money, right?"

"Of course."

"You can do it. It should only take a minute."

"Okay, you write notes for the affidavit."

Sean climbed out of the car, walked across the packed dirt yard, up the steps to the porch, and knocked on the door. The door was opened by a large man and Sean stepped inside.

Matt flipped over his pad and began to note the address, time of day, and who went to serve the papers, when he began to realize that Sean was gone longer than a simple "Tag, you're served." Hitchens knew they were coming. He'd be ready to meet Sean. Maybe he was on a phone call and Sean had to wait outside the office. Matt reached down and felt around for the foot-long steel bar by the edge of the front seat. He looked around to see if there were other vehicles out back. There were none. If Hitchens made a run for it he'd have to come out the front to get to his truck. Matt thought he'd just slide out and liberate some air from one of the truck's rear tires.

Just as he opened the car door, he saw Sean walk out of the house. He bounded down the stairs and strode briskly to the car like he was all done and ready to go, but he wasn't smiling. He should have been smiling.

Sean slid into the car.

"What's the matter? Wrong guy?"

"Oh no, he's the right guy. That's the problem. I know why he

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wasn't served before."

"Yeah?"

"He just offered me a thousand dollars to forget that I found him. He said, 'Oh, you guys again.' Somebody in the office found him and he bought them off."

"Yeah, so what, you papered him, right?"

"Not exactly. I told him I'd come out here with someone else who knew where he was. So he offered you a thousand, too. I told him I had to come out and get you to agree. He says he can get the money, in cash, of course, this afternoon. Anyway, I started thinking."

"You can stop thinking. We aren't doing this."

"Hear me out. This guy says taking the money isn't a crime. We're not sheriffs, we're not officers of the court. We can't be bribed. If we don't file an affidavit that says we couldn't find him, then we haven't committed fraud. We just walk away. That's all he's asking. Walk away with two thousand dollars. Somebody else has already done it."

"Sean, we can't do this. Mickey gave us this chance. We'd be stabbing him in the back. Hell, we have to tell him that somebody else sold him out. We're doing this for the summer, we're passing through. This is his life. We can't ruin his reputation."

"Yeah, but two grand sure would make our lives easier."

"No doubt. What do you think a hundred grand would do? We'll make more money someday. So this year we'll eat a lot of ramen, we'll mooch off all our friends, we'll go inactive at the fraternity. It'll pass. If we do this, that woman and her kids will never get that money."

"I know, I know. There's got to be a way to take the money and then paper him. I have no problem lying to a weasel like him."

"I don't know, man. That's real iffy. We've just got his word that it's not a crime. If you take it, maybe it's some kind of conspiracy to commit fraud even if we don't do it. It's his word against ours. We'd spend all the money in legal fees just trying to hold onto it or stay out of jail. Let it rest. Go back inside, tag him, and go. Agreed?"

"Agreed. Anyway, if I did it what kind of motto would we have? Whatever it takes or best offer?"

Sean walked back to the house and knocked on the front door. Hitchens yelled, "Come on in. Have a seat. I'm on the phone. Just be a couple of minutes."

Sean sat with the papers rolled up, batting them against his open palm. Five hundred bucks wasn't bad. Two grand was a whole lot better. But Matt was right. He'd known it before he opened his mouth but sometimes, just talking things out, they'd come up with better plans than either one of them had on his own. They'd served a lot of papers that way. The perfect solution was keeping the money and serving the guy, but that wasn't an option.

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He wondered how much they still needed for tuition. Their campus jobs in the cafeteria covered meals, and loans took care of room. That left tuition and books; oh well.

"All right, kid, come on in."

Sean walked into Hitchens's office. He was a big man, now well over two hundred pounds, Sean guessed, with long mutton-chop sideburns and a droopy left eye.

"What'll it be? If I was you, I'd take the money. If you serve me, I'll just get a friend to say I was at their job site when you claimed to serve me. Some place nice and isolated, no witnesses, just me and a friend. Your service'll be dismissed, my ten years'll run out. That bitch isn't getting one penny of my money. No way. Paying you off is just the cost of doing business. I accept that. It's easier, cleaner that way. No publicity, no court appearances, no hassles. Do the right thing, kid. Easiest two grand you'll ever make. It's a win-win situation. What do you say?"

Sean was adrift in this new sea of words. If the service was dismissed as bad, would they lose the five hundred? Could this turn out to be a complete loss, no service, no money? This guy had beaten the system for ten years. He sure sounded like he knew what he was talking about. Sean had to make a decision. The wrong one would carry a lifetime of consequences. Wasn't this why they got the big bucks?

"Okay, this is what I'm going to do. . . ." Sean spoke slowly, laying down a path of words like bread crumbs; maybe someone would find him before he committed an irreversible act.

"What we're going to do is take the money. That's what we agreed to, Sean, right?"

He looked back at the doorway. Matt strode in and reached out his hand to shake Burle Hitchens's. "You're absolutely right, Mr. Hitchens. This is a win-win situation."

"What the hell?" Sean said, relieved, confused, and angry all at the same time. He stared incredulously at his brother like the RCA dog, his head cocked to the side.

"Sean, what's our motto? Whatever it takes, right? Well, this is what it takes. Trust me."

A mechanical chirp interrupted them. Matt pulled a phone out of his pocket and pushed a button to answer the call.

"No, not now. I can't talk. Look, I'll call you back in, say, fifteen minutes, okay? Fine. Goodbye." He disconnected the line.

"Sorry, another case. Look, Sean, serving papers can't be all that we're about. There's more to life. That's the way I see it. We can do better here. Mr. Hitchens has offered us a way to do that. I think we ought to take him up on it. You understand what I'm saying?" He pointed the phone at him for emphasis.

"Yeah, I guess." Sean had the faint feeling that he was having

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two conversations, in two languages, ones that he knew just well enough to misunderstand with confidence. He decided not to speak but just listen carefully.

Matt turned toward Hitchens. "I'm his brother. He told you that we found you together. Let me make sure I understand the deal. You'll give us a thousand dollars each. Cash money, that's right?"

Hitchens nodded, "Yeah."

"In exchange we just take this Notice of Judgment and refile it as unserved, that's it, even though it is for you?"

"That's right."

"No false affidavits, and you don't want us to destroy the paper, just refile it."

"Yeah, that's the beauty of it for you guys. No crime's been committed. You walk away with the money, no risk of having it confiscated, no risk of jail, painless."

"Okay. You have the money here?"

"No. I can get it easy enough. Meet you back here in, say, an hour, how's that?"

"Tell you what, Mr. Hitchens. As a good-faith gesture, how about you give us whatever cash you've got in the office. That way we know you're serious about this, and when we take it, you know we're serious about our part. We're in this together."

"Good point. Let me see what I've got." He reached into the bottom left drawer of the desk and pulled out a metal box. He spun the combination lock, opened the lid, and took out a wad of bills.

He began to thumb the edges back, counting out loud, stopping at four hundred and eighty-three. "That good enough for you boys?"

"That's fine," Matt said. He stuffed the phone back in his pocket, took the money, and counted out half for his brother. "We'll see you in an hour."

"Nice doing business with you boys."

"Pleasure's all ours, Mr. Hitchens."

Matt led the way out the front door towards the car. Sean hurried to catch up. "What the hell was that all about, Matt? We're in the shit now. We took the money."

"Keep walking, Sean, and don't say anything else. We'll talk in the car."

Matt opened the car door and walked around to let himself in. In the car, he pulled the phone out of his pocket and spoke into the mouthpiece. "Did you get all that?"

"Every word. A warrant's been issued and a car should be there in ten minutes. You need to come straight down to the station and fill out a statement. He'll be booked and jailed."

"Great. We'll stay here until the car arrives, then we'll be straight over."

Matt pushed the Off button.

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"What did we just do?"

"We did 'better,' is what we did. Remember what Joe Anthony told us about serving him and still not getting a penny. I was sitting in the car and I said to myself, why am I letting a criminal tell me what is and what is not a crime? I called the police. His offering us money to not do our duty is a crime. It's corruption of an agent. Even if we aren't officers of the court, even if we don't commit a fraud. The officer said he could get a warrant and a car out here right away if a crime was committed in his presence. So I said, what if you hear it? He said, that's enough.

"I told him to call me on both lines. First one, then the other. When I answered the first call in the office, all I did was switch to the other line to disconnect him. That line was open and they heard everything. That's why I was waving the phone around. It was a microphone. Hitchens couldn't know that we have a two- line phone—when I said goodbye and pushed a button he assumed I'd turned the phone off. I just moved my hand up to cover the lights."

Matt dialed Joe Anthony's office as the police cruiser pulled up next to them. "Mr. Anthony. This is Matt Ellis of Short Fuse Process Service. I have good news for you and your client. Not only did we find Mr. Hitchens, but we served him, and he's also being arrested, as we speak, for corruption of an agent. He offered us a thousand dollars each not to serve him. He'll be going straight to jail and I'd think that should be enough with our affidavits for you to get that ABJ you wanted."

"Christmas in August. Great work, guys. Come by as soon as you can. I'd like you to give my client the news directly. You just changed her life and her kids'."

The police were walking Hitchens out to the cruiser. Sean got out of the car and approached as they were getting ready to tuck him inside.

"Burle Hitchens, this is a Notice of Judgment against you served in the county of Fairfax on behalf of Chelsea Lyn Dougan." As Hitchens's hands were cuffed behind him, Sean tucked the papers in his front shirt pocket, arranging them as neatly as a foulard. The officer opened the door and guided Hitchens into the backseat.

"You were right, Mr. Hitchens. This was a win-win situation. Only there were three sides to it, not two." ❸

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ROUND TRIP BY RAIL

by Gwen Davenport

Kentucky resident Gwen Davenport has produced several appealingly offbeat short stories for *EQMM* over the past few years. It is our good fortune that she seems to be concentrating on short story writing these days, but she is, of course, the author of many novels for Doubleday, at least one of which was made into a Hollywood movie. †

Hamilton Stone had been missing from home for two weeks before anyone even noticed. He lived with his wife, Olive, in a mid-size city in a mid-South state, where he worked as a pharmacist in the largest hospital. They had a ranch-style house in a commonplace suburb and a male golden retriever on which, being childless, they both doted. He was forty-two when he disappeared and she thirty-nine. They had been married for fifteen years, during which they had developed a real hatred for one another—quite understandably, as each brought out the worst in the other: He was always punctual, she invariably late; he liked meals to be served on time and well cooked; she picked up takeout food and ate when she felt like it, which was throughout the day plus a midnight snack. Constant conflicts and quarrels served to intensify each spouse's individual proclivities until, gradually, habits had become obsessions and airing of grievances had developed into temper tantrums. The little eccentricities and mannerisms that become endearing when the spouse is beloved were irritants that could start full-fledged fights. Since the Stones had no children and no immediate family except Olive's mother, Mrs. Edna Treadle, Olive was overly attached to that lady, who had always spoiled her.

Ham Stone had sought solace in his hobby, which was model railroads. The elaborate scale model of a mountain railroad was his pride and joy. He had built it over the years on a platform which took up the whole basement, a space fifty by thirty feet. The three diesel locomotives and a log loader were bought complete; everything else he had either scratch-built or assembled from kits: depots, water towers, passenger coaches, freight cars, track-inspec-

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tion sheds. On one end, on a spur at the entrance to a national park, he had opened a miniature railroad museum, displaying outdated narrow-gauge pieces like steam locomotives and refrigerator cars.

It was an expensive hobby, and a time-consuming one. Olive understandably resented the money and hours it required. Even Ham's weekends and vacations had been given to the railroad as he attended model shows and conventions of model owners all over the country.

Sometimes while running his trains—through tunnels, across switches, over bridges, along riverbeds, into stations—Ham had imagined himself a passenger, traveling far from the basement room and from the sound of Olive's voice into a world of his own, where he, Ham Stone, would disappear and become an eternal passenger, borne away on never-ending tracks. Alas, the tracks did not, in fact, end, but always returned to the starting point in the basement.

Nevertheless, Ham's harmless dream of riding away for good on some future day enabled him to bear his present situation. Over the years he had carefully planned his imagined disappearance. A search through the hospital's personnel records had rewarded him with a possible new identity: Frank Johnston, deceased, who had worked as a hospital security officer for fifteen years before his recent death at the age of forty-five. Frank's whole life was there, laid out, every detail: date and place of birth, names of parents and grandparents, graduation from Central High, marriage date with name of bride. An identification badge was easy to come by, and Ham's picture substituted on it in place of Frank Johnston's.

Ham opened a savings account in the name of Frank Johnston and began making regular deposits, starting with the money he and Olive had been saving to pay off the mortgage on the house. Small but regular weekly deposits from his pay followed, until, over the years, he had accumulated about eleven thousand dollars. He was not a reckless or adventuresome person; he had no real intention of disappearing into the void of Frank Johnston's identity, but the possibility of doing so, the knowledge that he had this tremendous secret from Olive, made life with her more nearly bearable.

The Stones' last bitter altercation had been, in a way, about the railroad. It took place in the basement, where Olive seldom went because the steep, narrow stairs were difficult to negotiate because of her extreme obesity. She moved like a pitching ship at sea, as her weight was transferred from one foot to the other. It was a Friday afternoon in mid July, at the start of Ham's two-week vacation. He wanted to spend it riding railroad trains in the Western mountains. Olive could not see train travel without a destination as being a vacation, particularly in their case. They had been arguing about it for some time, and whenever the subject came up,

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Ham would just go down to the basement and work on his railroad. With his vacation time already begun and the argument not settled, she was forced to take her case into his territory.

Ham had a habit, when concentrating on his work, of emitting a tuneless humming of which he was himself unaware but which got on Olive's nerves like a dentist's drill. She heard this continuous, monotonous sound during her journey down the basement stairs, and when she reached the bottom, out of breath from the exertion, she wheezed, "Stop that!"

He stopped working on a signal that was stuck at a siding and the humming automatically stopped also.

"I'd like to go to Miami Beach," she said.

"No one with any sense would go to Florida in July," said he.

"No one with any sense spends half his life playing with toy trains."

"Don't you call it a toy! It's a railroad, and there's no finer model railroad in the country!"

"I'd like to smash it to pieces!" cried Olive.

"Just you try and we'll see who gets smashed to pieces!"

"You care more about that contraption than you do about me!" she shouted.

"You bet I do!" he shouted back.

The golden retriever, which had been lying on the floor in a corner, came forward, twitching his tail, upset by the sound of the raised voices. Olive, now trembling with rage, laid hands on a water tower alongside the railroad track where a car was waiting to take on water. Ham seized both her hands and pulled her away roughly. She fell. He stood over her, fists clenched, glaring down. The dog pushed between them, separating them, not taking sides. There was an awful moment when neither husband nor wife moved, each fearing she might have broken a hip or an ankle, despite the padding of fat, but she managed to get to her feet laboriously, without help.

"I'm leaving this house," she declared, short of breath. "I'm going to go to Mom's and stay there till you come to your senses." She climbed the stairs with difficulty, stopping on each one to catch her breath. At the top she turned back and called the dog. "And I'm taking Rex," she said. "You needn't drive us over, Mom will come for us." (Olive had never learned to drive a car.)

Ham heard her telephone to her mother and then move about overhead, presumably packing a suitcase. After a while, the front door was opened and closed, followed by the faint sound of an automobile being driven away.

He sat down to think and let his wrath subside. His present anger, brought on by present grievances—about the train, the vacation, the dog, the leaving for Mom's—began growing bigger like a snowball, gathering to itself other grievances of long standing: Olive's laziness,

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her unpunctuality, bad housekeeping, childlessness, until he was consumed by an anger greater than he had yet known.

He would go away for his two weeks' vacation and ride trains through the Rockies and Sierras, even the Copper Canyon in Mexico. It would be wonderful to do it all alone, as he could strike up acquaintance with all sorts of people in coach cars, dining cars, club cars, bars, restaurants, hotel lobbies. It would be a glorious two weeks. But then—after it was over, he would have to come back here, Olive would return from her mother's, all would be again as it was now. And it was intolerable.

He decided to go away for good. He knew he had two weeks before he would be reported missing, and by that time Hamilton Stone would be gone, disappeared, vanished without a trace; he would have ceased to exist.

Fortunately, the Savings and Loan was open until late on Fridays, so he was able to withdraw all the money from Frank Johnston's account. He ate his supper in the kitchen, where he found in the refrigerator a big bowl of spaghetti and meatballs, a loaf of Honey Krust bread, two pies—a custard and a lemon meringue—a gallon container of chocolate-chip ice cream, and a carton that had held a dozen Hershey bars, with almonds, of which three remained. When he had eaten sparingly—a few bites of everything—he turned off the refrigerator and speculated happily about what the contents would be like after two weeks.

He packed with care, taking nothing that could be identified as belonging to him. He left behind all heavy winter clothing and all strictly summer things, so there could be no speculation about whether he had gone north or south. They would not look for him in Florida, since no one with any sense would go there in July. The only thing he regretted leaving, besides Rex the dog, was his wonderful, unique railroad. It was not yet complete: He had only started to collect the small figures of the people who would give it life—engineers, conductors, maintenance workers, passengers riding in the coaches and waiting on the platforms. Olive, he supposed, would smash it all as she had threatened to do.

Early on Saturday morning, Frank Johnston put his suitcase in Hamilton Stone's car and drove to the airport, where he parked in the long-term lot in the farthest corner, locked the car, and threw the keys into a trash bin, along with Stone's driver's license and the parking ticket. Then, carrying his one suitcase, he took a taxi back into town to the bus station. He boarded the first bus that left; it happened to be bound for Dallas.

Once the bus was on the road, Frank Johnston began to enjoy himself. He felt no remorse, no apprehension, no fear of being followed—only a soaring of the spirits, a sense of high adventure, of freedom. The bus had reached St. Louis before the euphoria sub-

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sided, leaving Frank cold sober, as it were, and facing reality. What now, Frank Johnston?

Olive had stubbornly stayed at her mother's house waiting for Frank to call her to make up. No one missed him until the Monday morning following his vacation, when the hospital began calling his home telephone number to find out why he had not returned to work. There was no answer. After several days, they sent a security guard to Ham's address; he reported no one there. It required more time to track down his wife at her mother's house. Olive had no idea where he might be. She called the police and notified the Bureau of Missing Persons. The missing person was a forty-two-year-old man of medium build with thin, sandy hair and a receding hairline, hazel eyes, and a pale complexion because he spent all his off-duty time in the basement. No distinguishing marks, except a habit of biting his nails on the right hand only. The police advised hiring a private investigator.

It was a month before Ham's car was found abandoned at the airport. Then several days went by while the police determined that Hamilton Stone had not been on the passenger list of any flight leaving at the time he disappeared, which time they were able to fix approximately by the condition of the refrigerator's contents.

Olive's anger was boundless. Her first impulse was to smash the train, but she was restrained by her mother, who pointed out that it was the only thing of value Hamilton had left behind. Olive decided she would have to sell it. Again it was Mrs. Treadle who advised against doing that. "It's the thing he'll come back for," she said, "that and the dog. He'll find he can't live without them two things and he'll come back."

Meanwhile, it was necessary that Olive find employment. She had never worked and was without the simplest skills. Her mother moved in with her to help with expenses, including payments on the mortgage, and Olive found a job with a cleaning service that paid the minimum hourly wage. It wasn't too bad; since she moved at the speed of a glacier, she could collect a day's pay for about two hours' actual effort.

Rex died eight years and six months after Hamilton Stone had disappeared. Cause of death was not a broken heart, as Olive believed, but old age; the dog was thirteen.

"Well, it looks like he ain't coming back," Olive's mother said, referring not to Rex but to her son-in-law. "We might's well sell the train and get shut of it."

Back issues of a magazine, the *Small-scale Railroader,* were stacked on a shelf in the basement. They were full of advertisements from buyers and sellers of model trains and all their parts,

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including the prices. Looking through them, the two women found that Ham's train was valuable; it might bring enough to pay off the mortgage and enable Olive to quit working, which activity—although requiring minimum effort—was becoming ever more distasteful. They entered into correspondence with the magazine, describing the railroad in detail, enclosing a spread from a local paper that had once published a piece about it. The correspondence resulted in a contract being entered into and Mrs. Treadle paying for a quarter-page advertisement. Prospective purchasers were asked to offer a reasonable price and given a box number to which inquiries were to be addressed.

Ten days after publication of the advertisement, a big Manila envelope arrived from *Small-scale Railroader*. It contained a dozen letters inquiring about purchasing Ham's railroad. Olive and Mrs. Treadle sat down to read them all, spreading them out on the kitchen table after Olive had finished eating two jumbo cheeseburgers and half a coconut layer cake. (Regular work had increased her appetite.)

One of the letters offered more money than any of the rest. It was postmarked Bradenton, Florida, and the letterhead read, Dr. Frank Johnston. His address was 5020 Gulf Boulevard.

"This one seems to know more about trains," said Olive, passing the letter across the table. "That's about what Ham said it cost him to build the train. Quite a coincidence, the price he offers."

Mrs. Treadle studied the letter. Struck by the sum mentioned, she said thoughtfully, "Maybe it's not coincidence." She gave her daughter a meaningful look.

Olive's facial expression remained unchanged, a mask of fat through which no emotion showed. The mother regarded her child fondly, loving her for being so totally dependent. She did not see in Olive a fat person with a thin one inside trying to get out; she saw a helpless baby girl almost concealed in a feather bed, as it were, from the depths of which peered two small black eyes.

"The handwriting," Mrs. Treadle said. "Look at the signature."

It was true that the s-t-o-n at the end of Frank Johnston's signature was very much like the s-t-o-n-e that was Hamilton Stone's.

"Olive, I think we have found Ham," said her mother. "Handwriting is something that can't be changed. I think Ham has come back for his train at last."

It might be so. But how could they be sure? It could be coincidence: The two things together—the price offered for the railroad and the similar handwriting—were not proof that Dr. Johnston was once Hamilton Stone.

"We must get a private eye," Mrs. Treadle declared.

Olive protested. "Mom, you know we can't afford it. They charge by the hour, they always do in the movies, much more than I make,

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and it would take hours and hours to go to Bradenton, Florida, even if he flew, and then there'd be the round-trip air fare."

"We still have the train," her mother reminded her. "We can offer the investigator the train."

"But if it *is* Ham, the train belongs to him, not to us."

"If Hamilton *is* Dr. Johnston, he must be rich. He was ready to buy the train, wasn't he?"

"Anyway," said Olive, "we don't know any private eyes."

"I'll get the phone book," said Mrs. Treadle, "look in the Yellow Pages."

They found Eagle Eye Investigations, Inc., specialists in Divorce, Child Custody, Marital Affairs, Background Checks, and Missing Persons. An appointment was made for a Mr. Fred Eagle to come to the house the next morning.

That night, Mrs. Edna Treadle lay awake worrying about whether she and Olive were acting most advantageously to themselves. If Hamilton were to be exposed, what good would it do other than give them sweet revenge? How could they get any of the money belonging to a prosperous Dr. Frank Johnston? Indeed, how could Dr. Johnston have any money if he was not a real person? Suppose Ham had remarried? What money he had would certainly go to Mrs. Frank Johnston, not to Hamilton Stone's wife Olive.

After several hours of insomnia, Mrs. Treadle got up, went over to Olive's room, and waked her. It was difficult to distinguish between Olive sleeping and Olive awake, but after shaking and punching the huge bulk the mother thought she had her daughter's attention.

"We don't want him back here, do we?" she asked.

"No!" said Olive. "I can't stand to have him around, him and his dumb train. Besides, he'd never get the job back at the hospital, we'd have to support him."

"I have an idea," Mrs. Treadle said. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, and here's what we'll tell Mr. Eagle. Give Ham back his train—if it *is* him—and tell him that in exchange for a nice monthly income paid to us we won't tell on him. He can go right on being Dr. Frank Johnston in Bradenton, Florida, and we'll be comfortable being right here—you won't have to work no more, we can hire a cleaning lady, we can even travel and see things. You always wanted to go to Miami Beach."

"Suits me," said Olive, turning her huge bulk over, "you make the arrangements."

"What you are proposing is blackmail," said Mr. Fred Eagle. "It is a crime."

"And I suppose what he done is not?" said Mrs. Treadle sarcastically.

"No, ma'am, it's not. There's no victim. Now, it's possible he's

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suffering from amnesia and won't remember anything about his previous life."

Mr. Fred Eagle was in appearance nothing like Humphrey Bogart or Tom Selleck. He was quite ordinary, he would be able to fit in anywhere unnoticed, unremembered. He had listened to the story about the Missing Person as told by the Person's shrewish mother-in-law and fat, whining wife, and immediately sympathized with the Missing Person, poor bastard. No wonder he had disappeared; too bad he hadn't done so without leaving a trace.

"If he don't remember about his previous life, how would he have recognized the train?" demanded Mrs. Treadle belligerently.

"We can't be sure about that, ma'am. There are millions of model-railroad buffs in the U. S. of A. Supposing this Dr. Johnston is not your son-in-law, it will be very expensive for you. My charge is sixty dollars an hour, plus expenses."

"You can have the train, whether it's his or not. And if we get two thousand a month from him to keep quiet, we can pay you anything we owe you over the value of the train."

"Such payment demanded from him would be extortion," said Fred Eagle. "It is a crime, like blackmail. I can't enter into any such arrangement. All I can do is positively determine that Dr. Johnston is or is not the Missing Person. First of all, I must get a handwriting expert to say the handwriting fits, and that will be the first of my expenses. I'll need all the photographs you have of him, and all his vital statistics: age, height, weight, measurements—like sleeve length and trouser inseam. Collar and waist are useless, they change with age. Medical records. Dental X-rays. Everything you can get. And—I'm sure you understand, ma'am—I must ask that we three enter into a written agreement."

"We'll have to sell the train before we can pay you," said Mrs. Treadle.

"Just don't sell it to the fellow in Bradenton," said Mr. Eagle in an attempt to be jocular. He rose to signal an end to the discussion, then added, "By the way, one more thing: Did Mr. Stone carry any life insurance? If he did, you might consider having him declared legally dead and try to collect it. The insurance people might pay my expenses in trying to find him, they don't like paying off for a dead person if there's no dead body, no death certificate."

"He didn't have no insurance," Mrs. Treadle declared. "He wasn't worth nothing alive or dead. His insurance was all in the train."

Before leaving for Florida, Mr. Fred Eagle went to the hospital and asked to visit the pharmacy where the Missing Person had been employed. He identified himself as a private investigator who had been hired to find Hamilton Stone. There were two pharmacists on duty, one of whom, a James Scholl, had worked with

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Hamilton Stone and had known him well.

"Have you any idea where Mr. Stone might be?" asked Mr. Eagle. "Did he ever mention any woman friend? When a married man disappears it's usually because of a woman."

"No, he never said anything about any woman," Mr. Scholl said, "not even his wife. We knew he was married, but we never met her. He was always quiet about his personal life. I wish he'd been as quiet about everything. He hummed incessantly while he was working, nearly drove me crazy. But Ham was a good pharmacist, good at his job, he didn't realize he had this habit of humming when he was concentrating. I'm sorry I can't be of help to you, I wish you luck, I hope you find him."

On arriving at the Tampa airport next day, Fred Eagle picked up a rental car and drove the short distance to Bradenton, where he found all the hotels booked full at the height of the season. The only room he could find was a penthouse suite, and that for three nights only, while the regular lessee was away on a cruise. He checked into the luxurious accommodations and wasted no time going about his business. It was already three o'clock in the afternoon. He decided to call at 5020 Gulf Boulevard on some pretext (life insurance salesman, poll taker, job seeker) to see if Frank Johnston positively could not be Hamilton Stone: too tall, too short, too dark, blind, or deaf—that is, distinctive in any way that could not be disguised.

Gulf Boulevard proved to be in a neighborhood of large, expensive estates right on the waterfront. Number 5020 was one of the most imposing, with gateposts at a driveway that wound back between two rows of royal palms to a Mediterranean-style house.

Fred parked the car in the street and approached the house on foot. At a turn where the driveway led to the front door was a small drive going to a smaller house with a sign pointing to it:

DOCTOR FRANK'S PHARMACY
Hours: Mon.–Thurs. 10 A.M.–2 P.M.

No cars were parked at the pharmacy, nor in front of the big house. Fred walked around the grounds, which adjoined those of the house next door with no fence or hedge between. Behind this neighbors' house was a large swimming pool beside which two persons, a man and a woman, were reclining on deck chairs, reading.

Fred approached them. "Pardon me, sir, pardon me, madam—"

The couple looked up. They were both elderly, obviously in their seventies.

"Perhaps you can help me," said Fred. "I'm looking for Dr. Frank Johnston, but it seems there's no one at home next door."

"This time of day they're both at the Shuffleboard Club," said the woman. "You'll find them there."

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"I'm just passing through town," Fred said, "on my way down the coast to Naples. Thing is, I was at med school with a Frank Johnston twenty-five years ago now, and I heard he'd moved to Florida, so I just thought I'd drop by and see if this Frank Johnston is my old friend. It's a fairly common name, might not be him."

"I don't think Doc went to medical school," said the man. "He's a registered pharmacist, not an M.D. Everyone calls him Doc."

"My friend Frank Johnston didn't finish med school," said Fred. "It might be him. Fellow about five eight, nine, slight build, he'd be about fifty years of age now."

"Well, this Dr. Frank isn't him," the woman said. "Doc's sixty if he's a day, heavyset, hair almost white."

"Oh—then I'm on a wild-goose chase," Fred said.

"No trouble," the man and woman said simultaneously.

"Has he been here long?" Fred asked. "I mean your neighbor. Reason I ask, it's unusual to have a business like a pharmacy in a residential neighborhood. Wouldn't be allowed in Naples. We have zoning laws."

He had touched on a grievance. Both the elderly man and the woman sat up straight and became interested. It seemed Doc had moved in next door only a couple of years ago when he married Marie. It was Marie's house; she had been their neighbor for ten years or so. She was a widow, very well fixed—her first husband had made a fortune in the liquor business, imported Mexican tequila. Dr. Frank had been her pharmacist. Marie had very poor health. Doc had prescribed miracle drugs for her, made her exercise, keep fit. Everyone was surprised when she married Doc, she had to be a good fifteen years older. Anyway, she had set him up in his geriatric pharmaceutical practice in her guesthouse. They got away with it because it was open only sixteen hours a week. The neighbors didn't like it, but there wasn't anything they could do about it.

Fred went back to his hotel and asked at the desk for directions to the nearest bookstore. He walked there and bought the latest copy of the magazine *Small-scale Railroader,* which contained Olive's advertisement. Then he walked around awhile, sightseeing, and ate dinner at the best restaurant in town, putting the tab on his expense account.

Shortly before two o'clock next afternoon, Fred again parked his rental car on Gulf Boulevard and walked down the driveway of 5020. There were two cars in front of Dr. Frank's Pharmacy, one of which was just backing out; its driver was a white-haired man. Fred went up the steps to the pharmacy door, opened it, and walked in.

There was a counter that held two large pharmacist's jars of colored water in front of an alcove lined with shelves holding bottles and boxes of all sorts. A man in a white jacket was talking to an elderly woman seated in a kind of waiting area near the door. On

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the wall behind her hung a framed diploma. Frank Johnston was a registered pharmacist in the state of Florida.

"Be with you in a minute, sir," the pharmacist said. He went behind the counter and began measuring out a prescription. Bent over a tray of small yellow tablets, he counted some of them carefully into a depression that ran along the side of the tray. As he did so, he began a tuneless humming in accompaniment to his work. When he had finished counting, he moved the tablets in the depression to a small prescription bottle and put the cap on. The humming stopped. He came forward from behind the counter and gave the prescription to the old lady. "Now, Mrs. Meade," he said, "be sure to follow the instructions exactly. No more than one tablet every twenty-four hours, on rising."

The old lady got up, took the prescription, and handed over a fifty-dollar bill. The pharmacist went back, put the bill in a drawer under the counter and handed over a five-dollar bill in change. "Thank you *so* much, Doc Frank," she said. "I don't know what I'd do without you, these sure do hit the spot, make me feel *so* much better."

"Glad to help, Mrs. Meade. Say hello to your good man for me."

"Oh, I will," Mrs. Meade said, turning to leave. "He's feeling like a new man with his new prescription. Goodbye now."

Fred Eagle had been studying the man in the white coat. He was overweight for his medium height, with a double chin and the beginnings of a pot belly. His face had a fringe of white whisker that matched what was obviously a hairpiece; no hairline was visible and the parting looked as if it had stitching.

"Dr. Johnston?" asked Fred cordially. "My name is Sam Caldwell. I'm the promotion and advertising editor of *Small-scale Railroader.*" He laid the magazine on the counter between them. "You answered an ad in the current issue and we noticed you wrote from Bradenton. I've come to ask for your advice and help. We've never sponsored a convention of model railroaders in this part of the country and I wanted to talk to you about the possibility of doing so. Are there enough model buffs around here to hold a convention? If so, is there a suitable auditorium? What about the best time of the year—hotel accommodations, climate, entertainment after closing hours?"

Doc waved both hands in the air, palms out in a negative gesture, while shaking his head. "It's not me wants the train," he said. "I don't know anything about them. It's for my wife, she's the one needs a hobby, and she thought the railroad would be good, it would fit into this place after I retire and close the pharmacy. It was her suggestion, looking in *Small-scale Railroader* magazine, so I bought one at the store in town. We don't subscribe."

"Why *would* you subscribe?" Fred asked.

"No reason, no reason," Doc said hastily. "We subscribe to the magazines my wife is interested in, like *Vogue* and *W*—things

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like that."

"Well, I'm sorry to have bothered you," Fred Eagle said, picking up his copy of *Small-scale Railroader*. "Thank you for your time." He extended his right hand across the counter and Dr. Johnston covered it with his own in a reciprocal gesture. The nails were bitten down to the quick.

It was a few minutes before two o'clock on a Thursday three weeks after Doc's visit from the editor of *Small-scale Railroader*. Doc had locked the pharmacy for the weekend and had walked over to the big house when he saw a car turn off the main driveway towards the pharmacy. He was of two minds whether to go back and open up for the latecomer, so he waited to see who his tardy customer was. The time was now exactly two o'clock. The car was an old Chevrolet with an out-of-state license plate. The driver parked it in front of the pharmacy and both front doors were opened simultaneously. Doc watched in growing horror as the unmistakable figure of Mrs. Edna Treadle emerged from behind the wheel, followed after an interval by the enormous bulk of Ham Stone's wife Olive getting out of the passenger side. The two women went up the steps of the pharmacy and tried the door.

Doc had not thought of Olive or her mother for eight years. So thoroughly had Hamilton Stone become Frank Johnston that they were two separate persons. Now Ham Stone's past had intruded into Doc Johnston's present. Doc recognized Olive and Mrs. Treadle from that other life when he was Ham Stone and he was momentarily petrified from shock. What are *they* doing *here?* he thought.

Then he remembered the visit of the man who said he was from *Small-scale Railroader* magazine and he realized with sinking heart that it was his own railroad he had inquired about buying. He turned away from the awful sight of the two women in front of his pharmacy and ran into the big house, where he closed the front door behind him and stood leaning against it as if to hold out intruders. When he heard the doors of the Chevrolet banged shut one after the other, he waited a few minutes before opening the door a crack. The back of the Chevrolet was disappearing on the driveway in the direction of Gulf Boulevard. He knew it would return on Monday when the pharmacy opened.

On the following Monday morning at ten o'clock the Chevrolet was again parked in front of Dr. Frank's pharmacy. The building was closed and its door locked.

"Not here yet," said Mrs. Treadle. "Get back in the car," she ordered, "so he don't see us when he comes."

By ten-thirty she began to realize he was not coming. It occurred to her that the P. I. Fred Eagle had let them down. He

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had submitted a very large bill for services and expenses, which she had paid after selling Ham's railroad. Mr. Eagle had failed to say that the pharmacy hours were so unusual. Was it open during those hours only by appointment?

At eleven o'clock, Olive announced she was hungry and needed to go to the bathroom.

"We'll have to ask at the house," Mrs. Treadle decided. "We'll say we need a prescription filled."

Leaving the car parked where it was, the mother and daughter walked over to the main house. The big, fancy automobile they had noticed parked in front of it on their fruitless first visit was not there. Curtains were drawn over all the windows; it looked as if there was nobody at home.

"Let's look around," Mrs. Treadle said to Olive.

They walked to the side of the house. There was no sign of life at the back of 5020, but a dog began to bark on the dock at the waterfront, where a houseboat was moored. By the swimming pool of the house next door a man and woman were reclining on deck chairs, reading. Mrs. Treadle and Olive approached them across the grass.

"Pardon me, lady," Mrs. Treadle began.

The woman looked up from the newspaper she was holding. "Yes?"

"I wonder if you can help us," said Mrs. Treadle. "We're looking for Dr. Johnston, the one with the pharmacy."

She had the instant attention of both the man and the woman. "Do you know anything about him?" the man asked, getting up to face the two strangers.

The dog on the dock had stopped barking and was now bounding across the lawn between the houses. It was a handsome golden retriever. It made for Olive and began to jump all over her.

"Down, Rex!" the man ordered, taking the retriever by the collar to pull him off. "He's just being friendly," he explained. "He's Doc's dog. He doesn't understand what's happened. Do you know anything?"

"Why, no—we was just looking to have a prescription filled, that's all, and he don't seem to be in his shop."

"He's been missing since last Thursday," said the man. "Marie—that's his wife—is beside herself with worry. He just disappeared, took nothing with him. The police suspect foul play. They found the Lincoln parked at the airport, but Doc wasn't on any flight leaving last Thursday or any flight since."

Olive uttered a kind of howl, tottered forward a step or two, and looked as if she might faint. Her mother quickly moved to prop her up. "It's all right, baby, it's the heat—we're not used to the heat, all this sun. We'll find someone else to give us the medicine—come along—" And she led her sobbing daughter away, back to the shade of the towering palm trees and the car parked in front of the abandoned pharmacy. ●

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Art by M. Bilokur

The Authentic Rose

by Terence Faherty

1.

"But there was a vase once. It just got rubbed off."

"Nope. No vase."

Patrick J. Maguire, known to about everyone in the Hollywood of 1950 as Paddy Maguire, was sceptical. He set down his drink—three fingers of Irish whiskey, neat—and got up from his chair, no small job in itself. He crossed to the table where the painting was propped up in a splash of evening light, bent at the waist, and stared at it, his cigar held respectfully behind his back.

"Painted over?" he asked.

"Never there," the second speaker, one Torrance Beaumont, said with a wink at me. Beaumont was a tough-guy movie star with a taste for the better things in life. He'd been to our offices, the offices of the Hollywood Security Agency, once before to drink and smoke an evening away. Then the subject had been the death of a human being and the likely death of a motion picture. Tonight we were discussing fine art, a restful change of pace.

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Terence Faherty's new story for *EQMM* introduces to the magazine a character who has already appeared in several novels, one of which won the Private Eye Writers of America's Shamus Award. Series sleuth Scott Elliott is a former actor and World War Two veteran who finds employment, in 1950's Hollywood, with a security firm. In this outing, the firm's client sends him on an errand in the wild countryside of New Mexico. ¶

Paddy snorted and returned to his seat, unblocking my view of the unframed canvas. He could have single-handedly blocked a pair of paintings its size: about two feet by two and a half. Mostly it was a cityscape, a stylized one, the towering buildings only black and gray slabs. There was a suggestion of a windowsill in the foreground and a smudge of river in the distance, a gray, dead river. All of that you noticed by and by. What caught your eye was the rose, a perfect red one, suspended in the gray air above the sill. It was this feat of levitation that offended my employer, whose taste in art ran toward stags, at bay and otherwise.

Paddy cleared his throat. "Mind if I ask what you paid for it?"

Beaumont surprised me by telling him, and the figure made Paddy whistle. I was tempted to myself.

"Worth every nickel, if it really is by Gladys Glenn Racine," the actor said. "Know her?"

"Do we, Scotty?"

I tried to rouse myself. It had been a long day. "Modern artist. Lives in the Southwest somewhere. New Mexico, I think. Paints desert landscapes and flowers and cow skulls, bleached."

"That's why I keep coming back here," Beaumont said. "The tone. Also the liquor."

He leaned forward so Paddy could refill his glass. As he poured, my boss attacked the painting from a new direction. "That's no desert landscape. It looks like a view of the East River from a cold-water flat."

"Very perceptive," Beaumont replied. "This happens to be from Racine's New York period. Early nineteen twenties. Back then she was the protégée of a windbag poet named Hiram Kinkade. He'd found her painting away down in Texas and talked her into coming to New York so the world could get a look at her. And so she could warm up Kinkade's bed, not coincidentally.

"She never fit in very well in Gotham. You can see that in this little gem. She was still painting the canyons and mesas she loved, but in the guise of skyscrapers. She painted them in funereal colors because she'd lost them. And she injected bits of

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nature, like this rose, to point up how dead the rest of her world was."

Our lecturer sipped his drink self-consciously and added, "That's what my Ph.D. art dealer told me anyway. Around 1925, she got fed up with it all, burned most of her paintings, and moved back West. The only New York pieces that survived were the ones in private collections, like this one."

"So the survivors are worth a pile," said Paddy, who understood supply and demand as well as the next man. "What's the problem?"

Beaumont was lighting himself a cigarette. I wondered if the timing of that was a coincidence or if, after so many years spent acting in melodramas, he automatically inserted the pregnant pause.

"The problem is, Racine didn't always sign her work. Especially her early work. The experts say this is a Racine, and that would be enough if she were dead. But she's alive and rich and crotchety. She saw a photo of this painting in the catalogue of the dealer who sold it to me. Ever since then, she's been telling all her artist cronies that it's a fake, the hack work of an art student she'd had underfoot back then, a Mabel Tuohy. According to the aforementioned dealer, the painting did come from this Tuohy's estate."

"So you want us to talk with the art dealer regarding a refund?" Paddy asked, seizing what he took to be a handle on the situation.

Beaumont showed his teeth in his trademark grin as he shook his head. "No. I don't want you to bump off Miss Racine, either. After a lot of haggling, she's agreed to look at the actual painting. I want young Mr. Elliott here to take it to her. In Agujero, New Mexico."

"Me?" I was roused now but good. "Why don't you go yourself?"

"'Cause I'm off to Africa in the morning. Four weeks of bugs and bad food just to get a little footage we would have shot in a couple of afternoons on the back lot at Warners in the good old days.

"Besides, I'm counting on the Elliott charm to soften the old girl up."

"Why would she need softening?" I asked. "Either she painted the damn thing or she didn't."

"Nothing's that simple. Not in the art world. There's always been this rumor floating around about Racine's real reason for leaving New York. Seems she might have found her poet lover in bed with another woman. Mabel Tuohy, to be precise."

2.

Late the next afternoon, I kissed Ella, my very pregnant wife, goodbye and caught a Santa Fe Railroad sleeper out of Union Station. I switched to a local in Albuquerque for the short hop north

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to the railroad's namesake city, which, ironically, was no longer on the main line.

Santa Fe was a sleepy town and squat, the buildings no taller than the trees and everything dwarfed by the surrounding mountains. I didn't waste much time rubbernecking. I'd gotten my fill of scenery as I'd breakfasted on the Super Chief. Most of the passing territory had been brown and barren, the month being February. A very dry February, according to the character in the Gene Autry shirt who rented me an old Ford coupe with canvas bags of emergency radiator water slung across its hood.

Gene gave me directions to Agujero, telling me to drive north to Española, make a left, and keep going until I came to a town.

"Suppose I don't come to a town?" I asked.

"Then drive till you see an ocean. You'll be back in California. Sell the car and wire me the money."

New Mexico through the Ford's windshield was an improvement over what I'd seen through a train window. A few miles north of Santa Fe, the mountains came close enough for me to spot the snow in their shaded folds. There were dark blue mesas and towering pink buttes that would have set John Ford's heart atwitter. The foreground was still dry sage and drier grass, but there were pine trees for variety, hundreds of fat ones, widely spaced and the height of a man on horseback.

Great country for an ambush, I thought, and the feeling stayed with me.

Agujero's suburbs was a stand of cottonwood trees along a stony riverbed. The downtown consisted of a collection of adobe buildings around an adobe church. Exactly two human beings were in sight, men in straw hats who were drinking beer from cans in the middle of the main drag. I thought of asking them for one, but settled for directions to Gladys Glenn Racine's house.

What I found just north of town was more a compound than a house. The buildings were one story and adobe, the main ones surrounded by a low mud wall that was itself surrounded by the best stand of trees I'd seen since leaving Santa Fe's plaza: oaks and spruce and a giant mulberry.

I parked outside the waist-high outer wall and walked to an inner one, a wall of the house itself. It was holding up an old wooden gate right out of a Zorro movie. The Fairbanks silent version, not the Tyrone Power talkie. There was a man-size door set in the gate. I knocked on it, though I'd already seen some movement through gaps between the weathered boards.

Sure enough, the door was opened right away by a young man who made me think the gateway might be a shortcut back to Hollywood. He was handsome in the way old Hollywood had defined the term for the world, his features small and fine, his hair and

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brows black, his eyes not much lighter. His smile, on the other hand, was a pre-nicotine white, set off by a complexion that was a shade my side of Cesar Romero.

Tastes in leading men had changed since the war, as I knew from bitter experience. Pretty boys like Jose—as he introduced himself—could be found in every menial job around movieland. Jose had found his in Agujero. He was Gladys Glenn Racine's assistant. And student, he added bashfully. I couldn't help thinking of the late Mabel Tuohy.

"Torrance Beaumont wired us you were coming," Jose said, mouthing the actor's name reverently. He led me across an inner courtyard and through the room on its far side, the living room, Jose called it, though the only furnishings were adobe benches that flowed out of the whitewashed walls. When artificial light was needed, it was provided by a naked bulb that hung by its cord from the ceiling.

We exited through the back of the house and followed a pebbled walk to a smaller, lower outbuilding. "Gladys's studio," Jose said.

Also her bedroom. Off the entryway that Jose ushered me through, I caught a glimpse of a cot. The monk's cell that held it was the size of the sleeping compartment the Santa Fe Railroad had rented me the previous evening.

Then I was in the equally barren studio, in the presence of the great woman herself. Gladys Glenn Racine was sixty-something and looked every day of it. Her straight gray hair was pulled back from a face that was all sharp edges and severe angles. Her skin was as sun-damaged as any I'd seen, and I lived in a town that worshipped the sun like nobody since the Aztecs.

Racine was seated on a stool before an easel, wearing an untucked and faded blue shirt and dungarees that looked brand new. She was facing the easel's canvas, giving me the benefit of her hawk's-bill profile. The artist acknowledged Jose's presence first, flashing him a smile that took ten years off her. Twenty maybe. I received a damped-down version and a question.

"What do you think of my home, Mr. Elliott?"

"It's a touch underfurnished," I said. Never too early to get off on the wrong foot.

Racine's voice was high and flat, and so was her laugh. Even so, it got Jose smiling. "Exactly as I like things," she said. "Underfurnished. The more empty space you have, the more beauty can sneak in."

She glanced toward the window behind her, and I realized that the subject had switched from her house to her adopted land. There was certainly a lot of empty space in sight, most of it deep blue sky. The lower half of the view consisted of chalky cliffs, which were represented on Racine's canvas by wavy white lines.

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"I'll be in shortly, Jose," she said.

He bowed and left us, taking the artist's warmth with him.

"Is that the painting?" she asked, pointing to the flat case Beaumont had provided, the one that had made me feel like a traveling checkerboard salesman. "Leave it, please."

When I hesitated, she said, "Don't worry. I won't throw paint on it. For one thing, that would make it a genuine Racine. At least in the minds of some critics. I'll give you my verdict at dinner."

"I'd hoped to be back in Santa Fe by then," I said ungraciously.

"Nonsense. It will be dark soon. You don't want to drive that road in the dark. You can get a room for the night at the cantina. We dine at eight."

3.

I looked for Jose outside the studio, but he wasn't there. Without him, I was hesitant to reenter the house. I circled it instead, passing several dormant garden patches connected by stone-lined irrigation ditches that looked as old as the adobe walls.

I made a left when those walls turned and entered the grove of trees I'd admired as I'd parked the Ford. As soon as I did, I spotted Jose standing near the trunk of the tallest oak. With him was a young woman who, for looks and coloring, might have been his sister. Might have been, except for the way he was holding her, which was tightly enough to knock her bright red shawl off her bare shoulders.

I altered course toward the setting sun to give the couple back a little of their privacy. As I did, Jose nodded to me, nervously. The woman just stared me down, imperious, though all of eighteen.

The Lost Mine Cantina had a room ready and waiting for me, having been forewarned by Jose, who had actually flashed the proprietor Torrance Beaumont's telegram. My host's name was Reyes, and he pumped me for information about Beaumont and other Hollywood lights while I sat at the cantina's bar. I was content to be pumped, since Reyes's beer was ice cold and I was waiting for a long-distance call to Ella to go through on the Lost Mine's—and Agujero's—only telephone. Besides which, Reyes was pushing fifty, and the stars he asked about were the ones I was fondest of, the ones who'd been big when I'd first hit Hollywood in the thirties.

In exchange for my gossip, Reyes, who was a short man with grizzled hair around his ears and none elsewhere on his scalp, told me the history of his cantina, how it had prospered back when the local silver mine had been worked and how he hoped it would prosper again. Those hopes rested on the Atomic Energy Commission, which was buying up a lot of land nearby, and on Gladys Glenn Racine, who had told Reyes of her plan to found an artists'

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colony. While he talked, I examined the blackened tree trunks that served as the room's ceiling beams and ran a finger along the rough scrollwork carved into the varnished boards of the bar. And I thought that the Lost Mine would be a hopping joint if the physicists and the flower painters showed up on the same night.

Reyes excused himself after drawing my second beer. I passed the time by working out what I'd tell Ella, not that I had much to tell. Toward the end of the beer, I got around to noticing that the cantina was filling up. That is to say, a dozen people, some of them genuinely elderly, had wandered in. It was my stomach that first alerted me to the change. A woman was ferrying platters of food between a back room and a long table set up in front of a modest bandstand. The food's spicy fragrance was singing a siren song that overcame the empty space between the buffet and my lonely end of the bar.

I looked over my shoulder, willing the long-distance operator to ring the office phone before the party started and I ended up on some grandmother's dance card. When I gave it up and looked back, Reyes was on the bandstand, calling the proceedings to order.

"Friends," he said. "I've asked you here tonight to share some happy news. Some very happy news. I am to be married. Hector and Esperanza Baerga have consented to give me the hand of their lovely daughter Maria."

Under the cover of more murmuring than applause, Reyes motioned for the Baergas to join him onstage. A man who ate no fat climbed up, followed, after an awkward interval, by the wife who ate no lean. She had the reluctant bride-to-be in tow. I'd missed the girl's entrance, probably while I'd been willing the phone to boil. Now I recognized the young beauty of the red shawl, whom I'd seen in Jose's arms less than an hour earlier.

I retrieved my hat from the stool beside me and slipped it on, tugging the brim down low. Maybe there'd be something to tell Ella after all, I thought.

4.

A little before eight I walked the short distance to Racine's house under more stars than MGM had bragged of in its glory days. I'd only packed the lightest of topcoats, having forgotten how the high desert bleeds its heat away at sunset. I drew the coat tight and set a healthy pace and still found myself knocking on the old wooden gate with some urgency when I finally reached it.

A less chipper Jose answered my knock. I understood his change of mood, so I didn't ask him about it. We again entered the house through the bus-station living room, where the apprentice took

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my coat and hat. Then he led me through a connecting doorway whose height forced us both to duck our heads.

On the other side was the dining room, where a mesquite fire burned in a tiny hearth. The narrow table was custom built of plywood. It was painted white, as were the mismatched chairs. Above the table hung a Japanese paper lantern of white and red.

Three places were set and set elaborately, the china so fine it was almost translucent and the silver heavy, each piece ending in a twisted silver handle topped by a turquoise knob. Jose stationed me at the end of the plywood nearest the living room and left me. He returned with Racine on his arm. She was wearing a simple black dress and a silver belt with links the size of quarters. Under her free arm, she carried Beaumont's painting. Jose took the canvas from her without a word and placed it on a shelf overlooking the unset side of the table. Our fourth for dinner.

Racine didn't greet me or comment on the painting. I was in no hurry to ask her about it, now that I was stuck in Agujero for the night. In any case, I was more curious about the grin she was grinning. If she'd been a cat, I'd have patted her down for canary feathers. Her eyes kept stealing to the forlorn Jose, who had taken the seat between us after filling the wineglasses.

"I hear you had some excitement down at the cantina," the artist finally began. "Paul Reyes announcing his engagement to our local beauty, Maria Baerga. Quite the social event of the season."

For a second I was sure she didn't know how much that announcement had cost Jose. Before I could tip her, something in her wicked grin tipped me, told me she knew all about it, that she was twisting the knife deliberately and loving it. The victim drained his wineglass as she rattled on.

"She worked here for quite some time, Maria. Until very recently. I had to let her go. She'd become headstrong. Disruptive."

While our soup—a corn chowder—was being served by a woman whose wrinkles topped Racine's, the artist picked up a thread of our earlier conversation in her studio.

"Do you remember me saying that I couldn't splash paint on that canvas you brought because some critics would then dub it a genuine Racine? I wasn't joking. That's the level to which some art criticism has descended. I've always been careful to destroy my failures and sketches for fear the collectors would snatch them up. But the other day I was applying a fresh coat of wash to this table,"—she laid the long fingers of her left hand down beside her straw place mat—"and it occurred to me that I'd have to leave instructions for the table to be burned when I die. Otherwise it might end up in some New York gallery: 'Painted by Gladys Glenn Racine during her furniture period.'"

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"Just tell people your assistant painted it," I said, not taking my eyes off her grin. It didn't lose a watt.

"Do you know what's wrong with an aesthetic sense that can't tell this table from a work of art?" Racine asked. "It has things exactly backwards. It defines art as something—anything—an artist produces. Backwards. An artist is someone who manages to create art. The work justifies the title of artist, the title doesn't sanctify the work."

She turned her haughty profile toward the disputed canvas for the first time. "Do you think *that* bestows the title of artist on its creator?"

"Yes," I said.

"Because it's beautiful?"

"No. Because it holds out the promise of beauty. In a world that isn't beautiful. The artist found something wonderful in an unlikely spot. That's the proof of it."

The soup bowls left and baked chicken arrived. It had less flavor than the air back at the Lost Mine.

Racine picked at her plate for a time. Her grin was gone, and I wasn't sure why. Then she said, "So you're an advocate after all, and not just a delivery boy. But your eye is no better than Torrance Beaumont's. That so-called painting is a fake. A fake Racine. It's a genuine Mabel Tuohy, not that that name means anything to the world."

"Mabel Tuohy?" I repeated. Then I took a bite of chicken I could chew contemplatively. My business for Beaumont was a bust, so there was no reason not to strike a blow for the heartsick Jose. "Seems I've heard of her. Wasn't she the mistress of a second-rate poet named Kinkade? Hiram Kinkade? Maybe the rose represents his iambic pentameter."

Racine came close to dropping her heavy fork on her fragile plate. She gathered herself and said, "Dinner is ended, Mr. Elliott. Take your painting and go."

5.

I returned to the Lost Mine with the painting tucked away in the case Jose had retrieved for me. As he'd shown me out, the young man had thanked me. I entered the cantina still wondering whether the thanks had been for mouthing off to Racine or for not mentioning the oak tree tryst I'd interrupted earlier in the evening.

Reyes was behind the bar. He waved to me hopefully, but it had been another long day. I went to my room—up a flight of stairs only a little more evolved than a ladder—and climbed out of my suit. I opened the case and set the painting on the washstand. Then I lit a Lucky Strike and settled in for some art appreciation mixed with self-recrimination. Three cigarettes later, I still hadn't

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thought of the magic words that would have made Racine acknowledge the painting. But I'd convinced myself that she'd painted it, that she'd denied it for the same reason she'd tortured Jose. Because it had pleased her to.

I gave it up then and went to sleep, making up for all the tossing and turning I'd done on the train the night before. The room was lit by a predawn glow when I awoke, but it wasn't the light that broke the spell. It was the sound of a woman screaming.

I was on my feet before I realized it, struggling into my pants and heading out the door before I made sense of something I'd seen in the room. I mean, something I hadn't seen. The rose painting. The washstand where I'd propped it up now held nothing but my shaving kit.

By the time I realized that, I was stumbling down the crude staircase. The screaming was still building to a crescendo when I arrived in the cantina's main room. The source was the woman who had catered Reyes's engagement party the evening before. She was standing at the end of the bar, over a figure spread-eagled on the floor. Paul Reyes, dead.

I thought I'd have to slap the woman to break through her terror, but one look at me shut her down completely. That and the arrival of another recent sleeper, who turned out to be her husband and Reyes's relief bartender. While she stammered to him in Spanish, I examined their late employer.

My lightning assessment of his condition had been based in part on his eyes, which were open and fixed and dull. The second clue was the knife planted in his chest. It was a carving knife from a very nice silver service. A service I recognized, oddly enough. The heavy handle ended in a turquoise orb, like the flatware I'd used at dinner.

"She just found him like that," the husband said to me. "She didn't touch him."

"Good. Where's the nearest law?"

"Española."

He went off to make the call, taking his wife with him. I stayed behind to watch Reyes and let my pulse settle. I also gave the knife a second look. It was driven in perpendicular to Reyes's chest. Exactly so. I checked the bloodstained cloth above and below the blade for some sign that the blow had actually been delivered at an angle, but there was no telltale slit in the fabric.

The bartender came back sans wife. He opened a fresh bottle of bonded whiskey, which he took from beneath the bar. I guessed it to be the owner's private stock. He poured us each a stiff drink, and we knocked them back without speaking.

I left him to handle the second round alone. I climbed up to my room and searched it for the painting. It was still gone.

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6.

By L. A. standards, the turnout was light. Two sheriff's deputies rolled in, followed by the sheriff himself, who was followed in turn by a crack forensics team: a country doctor and a fingerprint man from Santa Fe. The latter found lots of prints around the bar, including mine, but nothing on the knife handle, whose twisted design made it less than an ideal surface. The doctor wasn't much more help. He said only that Reyes was still dead and that it had probably happened closer to the bar's midnight closing time than dawn.

I was front and center through most of the preliminary investigation, being the man who had found the woman who had found the body. I was also the guy who had lost an expensive painting around the time Reyes was losing his life, a coincidence even an average sheriff would note.

My sheriff was better than average, from what I saw of his early work. At least he wasn't prone to posing or bossing people around for the sake of it. His name was Gentry, and he was ex-World War II issue, which is to say, my age. He had a Dick Tracy jaw, which he carried slightly raised, and blue eyes almost as pale as Ella's, which he wore wide open.

After Reyes had been carted off, Gentry joined me for a late breakfast in a quiet corner of the cantina. The *huevos rancheros* were served by my friend the screamer, whose name turned out to be Martha. We were pals, Martha and I. I'd shown up when she'd needed me, and she'd gotten me off the hook with my conscience. She'd done it by telling Gentry that the fatal carving knife belonged to Gladys Glenn Racine. Martha was very familiar with the fancy cutlery, her sister being Racine's wrinkly cook.

Gentry ate a good breakfast, but it didn't keep him from quizzing me steadily. I didn't let that ruin my meal. I was a stranger in town. I'd met Reyes. I'd been in the cantina when the murder had taken place. I'd had access to Racine's knife, at least in theory. And I'd reported a stolen painting. Those were too many interesting bits for the sheriff to ignore, though he was having a hard time fitting them together. During our second cup of coffee, he gave up trying.

"Do you know a Jose Fernandez?" Gentry asked me.

"Racine's assistant?" I asked back, all innocence. Jose was the reason I'd been hesitant to identify the knife. Jose, whose neck I saw as stuck out a mile. Martha had resolved that moral dilemma, but she'd also given the sheriff an earful of gossip.

"Jose Fernandez is in love with the dead man's intended, a Maria Baerga," Gentry confided. "Seems the match was her parents' idea, with the Racine woman acting as matchmaker. Maria's opinion wasn't asked, which made it that much harder for Fernandez to take. The engagement was announced yesterday. Today Reyes is dead."

"Where does the painting fit in?"

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"Dunno. A stack of search warrants is on its way up from Española. Given Miss Racine's reputation, I figured I'd need a few. In the meantime, I've sent for Fernandez. You're welcome to sit in if you want to."

I'd related a little of Hollywood Security's history to Gentry by way of establishing myself as one of the good guys. Too much, maybe, if the sheriff now saw me as an asset. Even so, I took him up on the offer.

Jose came in nervous and got steadily worse. Yes, he knew the knife. No, he didn't know how it had gotten out of its velvet box and into Reyes. He glanced my way contemptuously when Gentry asked him about Maria. "I love her," he said. "And she loves me. I don't care who knows it." That was all he would say on the subject.

When Gentry ran out of questions, I stepped in. "Been in the service?"

Jose treated it as a silly question, there being few men of draft age who avoided the service in these interesting times. "Of course. The army. Got out six months ago and came here."

"For Maria Baerga?" Gentry asked.

"No. For a chance to work with Glad—I mean Miss Racine. I met Maria at her house." He remembered then that he wasn't talking about Maria and shut up.

Gentry let him go for the moment, there being no place in Agujero to lock him up and no reason to improvise one. A desert town served by a single road was jail enough.

"What's his military service got to do with this?" the sheriff asked when Jose had gone.

"Were you army?"

"Damn right. Scenic Italy."

"How'd they teach you to stick a man with a knife?"

Gentry grasped an imaginary bayonet and thrust it upward. "Get in under the rib cage," he said.

"Reyes's killer didn't know to do that."

"He didn't have to, with that razor of a knife. Besides, you forget things when you're in a fit of passion."

I didn't like that "fit of passion." It made it sound like Gentry was already rehearsing for his press conference. "Does a guy in a fit of passion get shorter?"

"Huh?" the sheriff said.

"Jose's my height. Reyes carried a lot of his height horizontally."

"Meaning what?"

"If I'd wanted to hit that spot in his chest, I'd have had to strike downward. So would Jose. There's no sign of a downward blow."

Gentry took up his make-believe weapon again and practiced a straight thrust from the shoulder. "Someone his height," he said.

"Or less."

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7.

We killed what remained of the morning with a few more interviews. The most interesting was that of Maria Baerga, and not just because she was all shining hair and flashing eyes. She was without her red shawl for once, which left her with only a simple white dress. The color was inappropriate for an almost widow. But Maria denied being one.

"The betrothal was my parents' doing, not mine. I wanted no part of that. I decided to go away."

"Alone?"

"Not alone," she said defiantly. "With Jose Fernandez. We were going to go to California. So there was no reason for Jose to hurt that old man."

I wondered how serious the plan was, since Jose hadn't mentioned it in his own defense. But then, he'd gotten touchy on the subject of Maria pretty quickly. I asked, "How did Jose feel about giving up his job with Miss Racine?"

"Job?" Maria all but spat back. "Jose is not her assistant. Not her student even. He is her pet. He knows if he does not want to become more than a pet—worse than a pet—he must leave Agujero too."

Gentry settled back in his chair, signaling me to carry on now that I'd gotten her dander up. "Why was Gladys Racine involved in your engagement to Reyes?" I asked.

"Because she is an old busybody. Because she sees herself as the great lady and the rest of us as her peons. Because she was jealous of Jose and me."

"Is that why she fired you?"

"Yes. As old as she is, she still thinks she could have Jose if I were gone. But moving me from her house wasn't enough. So she got me engaged to a fat old man no girl would look at twice. She would do anything to keep Jose and me apart. If it meant losing Jose herself forever, she would do it, just to deny me."

Shortly after that pronouncement Maria left us, carrying herself like anything but a peon. Gentry watched her go, shook it off, and said, "Guess it's time we spoke to the local celebrity."

By then we were armed with a search warrant. Gentry took along a deputy to do the actual poking around. As the three of us made the hike to Racine's, the sheriff asked me again about my business with the artist.

He listened carefully to my rundown, and then asked, "If the painting really is hers, could she have wanted it back enough to steal it? Or if it really was painted by this other woman, the one who beat Racine's time with her patron back in the twenties, could Racine have stolen it as a way of striking back?"

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"At a dead woman? And speaking of dead, if this is all about the painting, how did Reyes get killed?"

"That's what I'm saying, Elliott. Maybe we're going at this backwards, trying to find who had it in for Reyes. Maybe he just wandered into trouble. He caught Racine walking out with the painting, and she killed him."

With a knife that couldn't fail to be identified as her property? Why was she carrying it in the first place? In case I was a light sleeper? And why did she leave it behind?

Before I could voice any of those objections, Gentry was shaking the idea out of his head. "The target had to be Reyes," he said, almost to himself. "It had to be Reyes."

8.

Racine came out to her gate to greet us. So she could get a jump on berating us, it turned out.

"How dare you come here to persecute that boy?" she demanded of Gentry. I was ignored and content to be. The artist was back in her paint-stained fatigues, but no less commanding for that. "Jose had nothing to do with the death of Paul Reyes."

"How about the theft of the rose painting?" the unfazed Gentry asked. "I have a warrant here empowering me to search for it. While my deputy is doing that, perhaps we could talk."

Racine received us in her courtyard, not wanting us to sully her house. It was an empty gesture, as we could hear Gentry's deputy sullying each of the surrounding rooms in turn as we chatted. The ruckus didn't rattle Racine any more than the exterior setting bothered Gentry. Or me, the day being warm and still.

Racine sat on the edge of an old well. In addition to the artist, the rounded lip held a collection of animal skulls and horns, each waiting patiently to be immortalized in oils.

The preliminaries regarded the knife. Racine admitted that its description matched one she owned. And that her knife was missing, something she'd determined the moment Jose had returned from his questioning. The silver was kept in an unlocked cabinet in the unlocked kitchen, crime being previously unknown in Agujero.

When we got around to discussing human beings, things heated up. "I was happy to help arrange the match between Paul Reyes and Maria," Racine said in response to Gentry's least friendly question to date. "It was very advantageous to her family, who frankly are quite poor. I've felt bad about them since I had to let Maria go."

"Why did that happen?" the sheriff asked.

"I'd rather not say."

"We've been told that it was because you were jealous of the girl and Jose. That true?"

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"She told you that. Maria."

"She also said you'd do anything to keep her and Jose apart. Even if it meant losing him yourself."

Racine's only reply was to grin her cat's grin. It wasn't a smart move, Gentry being largely canine.

"Are you in love with this Jose Fernandez?" he demanded. "Did he tell you he was leaving town with the Baerga girl? Is that why you framed him for murder with a knife you knew would be tied to this house?"

Gentry had found his link between Racine and the murder in Maria's tale of the artist's all-or-nothing jealousy. The theory explained why the gaudy knife had been used and why it had been left behind. I was impressed.

So was Racine. Her grin was deader than any of the trophies on the well's edge. Her "You're joking" came out as a whisper.

The deputy entered then, his timing as deft as his searching had been clumsy. Clumsy but effective. He carried Beaumont's painting before him, like the front half of a very small sandwich board.

"Found it in the sitting room. Behind another painting. A big painting."

"You got greedy, didn't you?" Gentry said to the artist. "Had to ruin the boy and get that painting out of circulation, too.

"Show me where you found it, Chapman. Elliott, watch her till we get back."

9.

Gentry and his man were crunching off across the courtyard's pebbles before Racine launched her belated defense. "Mr. Elliott, you don't think—"

I cut her off. "We don't have much time. Tell me about Mabel Tuohy."

"Why? What has she to do with this?"

"She's the one part of this story you know. Make it fast."

"Mabel was my student. My protégée. I discovered her as Hiram Kinkade had discovered me. Mabel was my answer to Kinkade, in a way."

"I'm not following."

"I didn't like being a protégée. Anyone's protégée. In Texas, I was my own woman. In New York, I was Hiram Kinkade's woman."

His kept woman, she meant. "Go on."

"Part of my answer was to paint New York as a memory of the West. Of my time before Kinkade. Another part of my solution was Mabel. I was just another planet in Kinkade's crowded solar system. In Mabel's, I was the sun. I became everything to her that Kinkade was to me, and she everything that I was to him."

"Including your lover?"

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"Yes."

"She was the one beautiful thing you found in the city. Your love was the beautiful thing."

"Thank you for putting it that way."

"But she betrayed you with Kinkade."

"He seduced her. He couldn't tolerate what she and I had found together. So he destroyed it by promising to make her his new project. The silly girl trusted him.

"It crushed me. Killed me. But I was reborn. Freed to come back to the West to work."

"Not so fast," I said. "Before you left New York, you destroyed every painting you'd done there. Every one you could get your hands on. Not because they weren't good either. You did it because Mabel was in them. Your love for her was in them. You didn't want that record to survive."

"I didn't steal the rose painting, Mr. Elliott. You have to believe me."

"I have to understand this. You were willing to destroy your work, to kill part of yourself, just to kill part of her."

Racine swayed on the edge of the well. I reached out to keep her from falling backwards. She didn't seem to notice my hand on her shoulder. "So you believe the sheriff. You think I'd destroy Jose rather than lose him. But I could never do that. The revenge I took in New York in the twenties was the spiteful act of a passionate girl."

Which brought us to the next order of business. "Tell me about Maria."

"What about her?"

"What was she to you before Jose came along?"

"Exactly what you suppose. She's a beautiful thing," Racine added a little dreamily. "A perfect thing."

"Not so perfect," I said. "Not anymore. Your mistress took up with Jose the way you took up with Mabel Tuohy, for the chance to be the sun instead of a hanger-on. And you struck back the way Hiram Kinkade did, by dazzling your rival, Jose, right out of your lover's arms. It was New York all over again, right down to the payoff."

Racine saw the whole thing then. She clutched at her work shirt's collar. Not far from her hand was a splash of white paint. I saw a splash of red.

Gentry was back and staring at us. "What's happened?" he demanded.

"Got another search warrant?" I asked.

"What did you lose this time?"

"A red shawl."

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10.

Chapman, the bloodhound deputy, came through again. He found the red shawl in a shallow grave behind the Baergas' adobe. The shawl was brown and red now, as it was stained with the dried blood of Paul Reyes.

I got the word in the Lost Mine Cantina, where I was at my old stand at the end of the bar, staring down a beer that was the second coldest thing in the town of Agujero. Sheriff Gentry himself stopped by to tell me of the coldest thing: Maria Baerga.

"Once we showed her the shawl, she admitted everything. How she got the knife out of Racine's kitchen last night while the cook was busy with you folks in the dining room. How she waited till the bar was empty to confront Reyes, walking right up to him smiling and him smiling back. And how she slipped the painting, which she'd heard about from Jose, out of your room and into the spot where Chapman found it. So we'd suspect Racine.

"She admitted all that and to hell with us. Never saw the like of that girl's nerve. Hope I don't again."

I bought the sheriff a beer, although my experience had been that the local product wasn't nearly strong enough.

"What did I miss, Elliott? What tipped you off?"

I knew Gentry wouldn't sit still for the legend of Mabel Tuohy and Hiram Kinkade. So I just said, "She told me. Told us. Maria. When she said Racine would destroy Jose if she couldn't have him, she was telling us how she felt about things herself. She set the murder up so she'd win either way. Either she'd frame Racine—and Jose was hers—or you'd take Jose—and Racine would lose him forever."

The explanation lacked the classical symmetry of the solution I'd laid out for Racine—that the New York triangle had somehow recreated itself in dusty New Mexico—but Gentry wasn't connoisseur enough to care. He had his killer, and that was that. He shook my hand, gave me an empty invitation to look him up next time I passed through, and left.

I was ready to leave myself. Despite Racine's earlier warning about driving the road to Española after dark, I was determined not to spend another night in Agujero.

Before I'd managed to climb down from my stool, someone tugged at my sleeve. It was Racine's elderly cook. She actually curtsied before handing me an envelope. It contained a note written in a faint wavy hand:

"To whom it may concern: The painting 'A City Rose' was done by me in New York in the spring of 1925. It was presented as a token of affection to my good friend Mabel Tuohy, who kept it until her death."

The handwriting firmed up for the signature: "Gladys Glenn Racine, Agujero, New Mexico, February 1950." ●

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THE HUNTERS

by J. F. Freedman

1.

They got up. It was dark out. They went down to the kitchen in their sock-covered feet, carrying their boots so they wouldn't make any noise. In the kitchen they made themselves breakfast. Bacon, fried eggs, toast, coffee. It was going to be a long day and it would be cold out. Then they made their lunch, thick roast beef and Swiss cheese sandwiches on rye bread. They wrapped the sandwiches in wax paper and stuck them in a paper bag. They put in some Snickers and Hershey bars, too. They filled their thermoses with hot coffee and screwed the lids on tight. The older one had a hip flask that had been their father's. He filled it with whiskey and stuck it in his back pocket. A nip to ward off the cold, not enough to fog their aim.

J. F. Freedman is the author of five very successful novels published by Viking, Dutton, and NAL, but he has never before had a short story published in a national magazine. This short fiction debut comes at around the time the paperback of his most recent novel, *Above the Law,* is due to appear in bookstores. *EQMM* extends a warm welcome to a writer we hope will devote more time to short stories in coming years.

The official hunting season was short this year. Too much game had been taken over the past few years and the Forestry Service wanted to maintain sizeable herds, so they'd cut the schedule in half. In two more days, there would be no more legal hunting until the following year. Which meant hardly anyone would be venturing deep into the hills until summer, when the area would be an attraction for hardy hikers.

The short deer season didn't matter to them. They weren't hunting for meat. The hunter's freezer was already stocked. He'd taken two does earlier in the season; he had plenty of venison. This was a predator hunt, which required a special license that cost several hundred dollars. For that fee, the hunter was allowed to take a single predator from the cull list. The list this year included

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mountain lion, bobcat, wolverine, and for the first time in seventy years, wolf. Wolf packs had been reintroduced into the area a decade ago, and the relocation had been so successful that a very limited hunt had been approved this year.

Thirty licenses had been sold statewide. They had bought one of them.

The predator season was one week long. If a licensee didn't bag an animal, he lost his money. It was an expensive crapshoot for experienced and determined hunters.

They had cleaned their rifles the night before. The rifles were old and reliable. They had hunted with them many times over the years, but this would be their first and last hunt of the season together.

They had less than a dozen bullets for the day, whatever was left over in the box from last year. More than enough ammunition for the prize they were going after. They didn't know for sure if they'd find the trophy they were seeking, but if they did, one shot should be enough. They were both good marksmen. When they got a target in their sights, they didn't miss. Their scopes had been calibrated at the beginning of the season. They were dead-center perfect.

They finished getting dressed. Heavy wool pants over poly longjohns, wool shirts, bulky-knit sweaters. Fleece-lined canvas jackets that came down to their thighs for warmth, and to cut the wet wind or rain, if it came to that. It wasn't supposed to rain. They would be uncomfortable enough, waiting out there, without having to get rained on. But if it did rain, they would stick it out. They were intent on bagging a trophy, and if you had to get wet or cold, that was the price you paid.

It wasn't that far to where they were going hunting, less than sixty miles. They would get there at daybreak, giving them time to set up and get comfortable (as comfortable as they could get considering it was winter and there was snow and ice on the ground and the temperature would be around freezing all day).

It was pitch-dark out when they left the house. The new moon, a fingernail crescent, was obscured by clouds. The driveway sloped down to the street and they coasted the truck down with the lights off, not turning the ignition on until they were at the bottom. The engine caught with a low rumble and the driver backed out into the street, saving his headlights until they were pointed away from the house.

As they pulled away, the driver looked back over his shoulder towards the house. They had left the light on in the kitchen; as the truck trundled down the slick narrow blacktop he saw a second light go on upstairs, in a bedroom window. He thought he saw a shadow in the window, a reflection from the light inside, but he wasn't sure.

They drove to their destination at a leisurely pace, parked their

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truck in a secluded area, hiked into the mountains, and set up on a small bluff with a good view to the narrow, mostly overgrown trail below. If their intended prize came, it would almost certainly come down this trail. The woods were too thick on either side to get through. If their target showed up, they would have a clear shot.

They hadn't seen any other footprints since shortly after they'd left the car and headed up the trail. They hadn't stayed on the trail long; they didn't want to leave footprints of their own. They had circled around the long way to get to this view spot; it had taken an extra hour of hard going through gnarly woods, but they hadn't left any trace of having come this way. And they made sure they were downwind from the direction they figured anything would come.

The advantage of the extra work was that they were in an area few others would traverse. There were closer-in, easier-to-get-to places if all you wanted was a run-of-the-mill deer. If something showed all the way up here they would have the kill to themselves. And it would be worth it.

They had good reason to believe their target would show up, that sooner or later he would come down this trail. The lead hunter had come upon his tracks a few days before, when he was out looking to see where the best place to bag his trophy might be. The tracks had been large and fresh, and the way they imprinted the soft ground indicated an animal unworried about being some hunter's target. This was a mature specimen, who had survived for a long time out here and knew his way around. It was a male, there was no question in their minds. The size, weight, and spacing of the tracks were too large for a female. The head and pelt would be huge, a prize trophy. The kind a sportsman waits a lifetime for.

The sun rose up, hanging low on the horizon for a long time before starting to climb, a pale milky gray-yellow. It was wintertime, the sun would be low and weak all day, and it would set early. They sat patiently, huddled up against the wind that wasn't blowing hard but was a steady, bone-chilling force.

Around eleven o'clock they each ate half a sandwich and a candy bar. They folded up the wrappings and jammed them in their pockets. They were good hunters, good sportsmen. Anything they brought in, they carried out; and they swept their footprints with pine boughs when they left. Tomorrow somebody could come through here and not know a human being had been anywhere near these parts.

The coffee, still hot in the thermoses, helped ward off the cold. So did the postprandial nip of whiskey. They didn't have to worry about their reflexes going mushy from the whiskey; the cold kept them sharp.

There wasn't much sound: the wind in the barren trees, leafless and black against the colorless sky. The heavy pines sagged from

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recent frost. No birdsong. A cracking of branches from small animals running under the dead leaf cover, and a few times the sound of an icicle breaking off and crashing to the ground.

The younger one, who had ridden shotgun on the drive out, checked his watch and turned to his brother. "Is your animal going to show?" he asked. "Seems if he was going to come this way, he should've done so by now."

The other, the man whose house they had started out from, who had driven away and looked over his shoulder and seen the shadow in the window, shrugged his shoulder. "Hope so. Be a long hike if it turns out to be nothing to show for it." He pointed down below them, where there was evidence of fresh animal activity, deer, rabbit, other game. "He hunts here. He knows this is where his dinner will be." He looked off towards the horizon. "That's if he's hungry. There's no guarantees. It ain't like punching a clock." He looked off again. "If he shows now, it'll be closer to sundown, likely, or not at all. That's how they hunt."

The other nodded in agreement. That's how animals like this hunted.

At two-thirty they polished off the rest of the food they'd brought. An hour left, then they'd have to head back before they lost the light.

Off in the distance, coming up the trail towards them, they heard the sounds of footfalls. Something big. The pace was steady, unhurried.

The two men stood straight, exchanging a glance. They readied their rifles, cocking a bullet into the chamber of each one.

"The first shot's mine," the host reminded his partner. "If I miss, or just wound him, then you take him down."

The second man nodded his understanding and agreement. That had been their plan, from the time they had first discussed this trip.

The sounds were coming closer. Their prey hadn't cottoned to their presence. As it ambled around the last bend in the trail before the clearing, about a hundred yards down-trail below them, the lead hunter raised his rifle and squinted into his high-powered sight.

The second man squinted into his sight as well, to see how big it was, if their hard work and long patience had been worth it. "Shit!" he exclaimed softly, his breath a small cloudpuff. "There he is, just like you said he'd be. How could you know he would come this way?"

"I followed him, before the season started." He could feel the hairs tingling on the back of his neck, on his arms under the layers of clothing. "We're all creatures of habit, man and beast."

The animal stopped for a moment, looking around, seeming to sniff the air. Through the scope, the hunter could see what appeared to be a quizzical expression drift across the eyes. Had he

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heard something? He couldn't see the hunters, they were covered. And the wind was in the wrong direction for smell.

After a moment, satisfied there was no harm impending, he continued up the trail in their direction.

The hunter had his target in his sights. It was a big head, a beautiful head. Proud, noble, imperious. It would be the best trophy he had ever bagged, or ever would. The hard work getting up here, the planning for it, it had all been worth it.

Rifle fire exploded the silence. Through his sight, the hunter saw his bullet explode in his target's neck, right behind the head.

The target went down where he stood, dead instantaneously, frozen forever in the moment of its dying. A pure and beautiful kill.

They scurried down the embankment. The lead hunter calmly walked over to the dead thing at his feet. The body was warm, exuding heat-aura.

"Good shot. Good, clean kill."

"Thanks."

They slit the animal's neck with one clean cut, holding the body up so the blood didn't drip onto it, the dark blood running out onto the hard ground. After the blood had all run out, they gutted the body, keeping the head and a small, prime section of pelt.

He had come for a trophy, and now he had it. The rest—bones, innards, flesh, organs—they would leave for the buzzards and the wild dogs and coyotes that roamed these hills, that were especially voracious in winter, when food was scarce. In less than a week, there would be nothing left but a clean-picked pile of bones.

The trophy, head and rolled-up pelt, went into a large Ziploc freezer bag they'd brought for such a purpose. The hunter cinched the bag up tight.

They made their way down the trail, passing no other hunters on their way. It was late; anyone who had been out hunting in this area would have gone in by now. The shooter didn't expect that anyone else had been here. There had been no other shots, and theirs had been the only vehicle in the out-of-the-way parking lot.

The dying sun, a reddish-purple mirror image of the one that had risen with them in the morning, was spreading its last spider-like tentacles across the far western hills as they reached their car. The hunter opened the trunk and placed the freezer bag into a large Igloo cooler he'd brought for this purpose. The ice inside the cooler was still frozen; the temperature had never gotten above freezing all day. They packed the ice around the head, to keep it fresh.

There were a couple of swallows of whiskey left in the flask. They shared it as they drove back to the house. The hunter's brother, who had flown a thousand miles to be here for this, looked over and smiled, his teeth bright in the reflection of the oncoming headlights.

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"A good day's work," he commented.

The driver's look was fixed out the windshield, down the road. "We got what we came for."

2.

They drove the truck up the driveway, parked in the garage, and went into the house through the hallway that connected the house to the garage and served as a laundry/mud room. The door leading into the house proper was open a crack. Dinner was cooking; they could smell it. Some kind of chicken stew.

"Is that you, Jeff?" A woman's voice called out from the kitchen.

The one who had the kill called back from the mud room where they were still stripping off their muddy boots and peeling off the layers of sweaters, shirts, and long underwear. "Yeah, it's us." He wiped his face down with a towel. Driving home in the car with the heater on had raised a sweat. "Were you expecting someone?"

"Like who?"

"I don't know."

"I just wanted to make sure it wasn't the bogyman."

"I'm not the bogyman."

"Dinner'll be about half an hour."

"We'll shower up first."

They padded across the family-room floor in their socks. They had stripped off most of the layers of clothing they'd been wearing and carried the rumpled, soggy shirts and sweaters in their arms. The woman, Jeff's wife, came out of the kitchen. She was wearing bunny slippers, around-the-house jeans, her husband's baggy Washington Redskins sweatshirt.

The man stopped at the bottom of the stairs. His brother kept going up to take a shower.

"How was it?" she asked.

"Cold. Cold as hell."

"How'd you do?" She hadn't seen them drive up.

"We did okay."

"You got that big trophy you were hoping for?"

"We like to froze our asses off. But we did okay." He paused. "It's out in the truck, under the camper shell. You can go take a look at it if you want."

She shuddered. "No, thanks." She hated hunting. She never would look at anything he had killed.

"Suit yourself." He shifted his clothing in his arms. He was wearing suspenders on his wool britches that hung low around his knees from where he'd pulled them off his shoulders when he was getting undressed. He was a big man, sinewy in his muscles, not turning to fat much yet. He still had all his hair. Of course, he wasn't forty, not for a few months yet. The hair thing could still change.

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"Are you cold now?"

"I'm warming up."

"Do you want a bath? I could draw you a hot bath."

"Naw, shower'll do."

"Dinner'll be ready in about a half-hour."

She went back into the kitchen. He trudged upstairs, feeling the weight of the heavy wool clothes on his arms.

He took a long shower; the needles of scalding water on his pale skin felt good. He stood under the water for a long time until he turned lobster-pink. It took awhile to feel clean and warm again, but after he had toweled off and put clean clothes on and had come down to join his brother in the family room for a highball before dinner, with the Sunday night football game droning on in the background, he was back to normal.

Dinner was chicken and dumplings, succotash, winter squash, salad. She had made apple brown betty for dessert. It was keeping warm in the oven.

"I figured you'd be hungry, out there in the cold and wet wind all day."

"You figured right." He forked in the food, his arm a machine with a hand and fork attached to the end of it.

"This is really good, Becky." Bobby, his brother, smiled at her across the table. He was the younger by two years, and had always been nicer than his older brother. More eager to please.

"Thanks, Bobby."

"Great, hon." Her husband spoke through a mouthful of food.

"I'm glad you like it."

She carried the dishes to the sink and let them soak in hot soapy water. The men sat in the family room in front of the television set, watching the game. She brought them each a bowl of apple brown betty with a dollop of Breyer's vanilla ice cream on top.

She went upstairs and came down ten minutes later. She was dressed up. A clean blouse, fresh-pressed jeans, low-heel boots. A tan brocaded alpaca sweater her sister had given her for Christmas two years ago.

"I'm going out now," she said. "I don't know how late we'll be, so don't bother waiting up for me."

"What's tonight?"

"Knitting." She held up her knitting bag. Balls of yarn and needles stuck out the top.

She was out more nights a week than she was in. Her knitting group, her book group, her bridge game. Volunteer Red Cross stuff. He couldn't keep track of all her comings and goings. He didn't bother trying. She did her thing, he did his. Once in a while they did something together.

"See you later." He spooned up a mouthful of the hot dessert.

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She pulled on her down-filled car coat. "See you."

His brother called it a night when the football game was over. His flight home left early in the morning and he was bushed from the whipping they'd taken from the elements. "See you in the morning," he said as he pushed up from the couch.

"Yeah. What time do you want to leave for the airport?" The airport was normally about a thirty-minute drive, but if the roads iced up overnight it could be slow going.

"The plane's at seven-fifteen."

"We'd better leave at six. You carrying on your luggage?"

"Yes."

"Six, then. I'll have coffee brewing."

"Sounds good." His brother started up the stairs to the guest bedroom.

"Hey, listen." He hesitated. "Thanks."

"You're my brother. It had to be done."

He fixed himself another drink, a weak one, and went out to the garage. He got the rifles out of the truck, cleaned and oiled them at his workbench. Then he took the cooler out from where he had placed it under the camper shell and lifted out the heavy trophy head and skin, which were still in the Ziploc bag. Using one of his sharp fileting knives, he separated the head from the pelt. He placed the head back into the Ziploc bag and put it in the large floor freezer in the corner of the garage. The skin went into a second bag. He moved some stuff around so they would fit on the bottom, then covered them up with frozen packages. The trophies, especially the head, weren't going anywhere for a while, and he wanted to keep them fresh.

He came back into the house and locked the guns up. On the television screen the *X-Files* was coming on. It was a rerun, but he watched it anyway. Halfway through, at the commercial break, he heard the winching sound of the garage door opening. Then he heard the sound of his wife's car slowly coming up the slick driveway and pulling into the garage.

A moment later she came in. "Bobby turn in already?" Her face was red and chapped.

"Yeah. He's not used to this weather." He looked over at her. "Been outside?"

Her hand went to her face, her fingertips touching one raw cheekbone. "I took a walk. Down by the river. I've been inside all day, I was going stir-crazy."

"It wasn't too cold?"

"I came home when I got too cold." She changed the subject. "You're taking him to the airport?"

He nodded. "We're leaving early. I'll try not to wake you up."

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"I don't mind. I want to say goodbye to him."

"I'll wake you up before we leave."

She hung her coat up in the hall closet.

"You're home early," he observed.

She gave a little shrug. "Only a couple of the girls showed up. We ran out of things to say." She looked at the television set. The commercials were still running. "What're you watching?"

"Mulder and Scully."

"Is it any good?"

"I've already seen this one. It's okay. Not too gory."

She paused, as if deciding whether or not to sit down with him on the couch. "I have a call to make. Before it's too late." She went into the kitchen, out of his line of sight. He heard her punching in some numbers. There was a long wait. Then she hung up.

3.

He pulled an hour of overtime, which was good money, time and a half, so he didn't get home until close on seven. He was the foreman, he didn't go home until everyone else did. He'd been there his whole adult life, except for a stint in the Navy. If he ever upped and quit they wouldn't know what to do. He didn't say that—his boss did. He wasn't one to brag on himself. He let his work speak for itself.

She had dinner all ready, Swiss steak with some fancy kind of potatoes and a green vegetable and salad. Pillsbury rolls. There was some of the apple brown betty left over from the night before for dessert. Even though she worked—she was the secretary to the principal at the high school, the hours weren't bad and she had summers and holidays off, and the money was pretty good, it definitely came in handy—she fed him a real meal every night, not some freezer food thrown in the microwave. They didn't have any children of their own—that freed her up.

"Work late?" she asked. She set his food down in front of him.

He'd washed up, had a light Jim Beam on the rocks, looked over his mail. Bills. He took *Sports Illustrated* and *National Geographic.* Neither magazine came on Monday.

"I should've called," he apologized. "It was a last-minute thing. We had to get an order out."

"No big deal." She hovered at the edge of the table. Watching him eat her cooking was one of the most pleasurable things she got from him. He appreciated a well-cooked meal, even if he didn't express his feelings as much as she would have liked.

He glanced up. "Aren't you eating?"

"I already did. I got hungry."

"It's good."

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"Thanks." She glanced at her watch, a practiced nonchalance. "I'd better get going."

"What's tonight?"

"Book club." Her 'book club,' half a dozen women like herself, met once a week, Monday nights.

"What're you reading?"

"We're starting a new Amy Tan book."

"Any good?"

"We're just starting it. I've only read one chapter. I'll let you know if it's any good. Probably not your taste." She pulled on her car coat. "You don't have to wait up. The brown betty's in the fridge. You might want to zap it for a minute."

"Okay. Have fun."

"Thanks. See you."

"See you."

He listened for the whirr of the garage door automatically opening, the sound of her car engine turning over, the tire squeal going down the driveway. He rinsed his plates in the sink, took out the bowl of pudding from the refrigerator, gave it thirty seconds in the microwave, and squirted Reddi-Wip on the top, since he and his brother had finished the ice cream the night before.

He watched headline news on CNN, eating the warm dessert while standing up in front of the set. Then he rinsed the dessert bowl out and went out through the mud room into the garage.

He felt a dry-cold rush as he opened the freezer door. Pushing aside a variety of frozen packages, he lifted the trophy head out, holding it up so he could see it in the one-bulb light.

It was frozen solid. He rapped on it with his knuckles. Solid, like a brick. You could crack somebody's skull with this sucker, he thought. He remembered that old *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* he'd seen one time on Nick at Nite, "Lamb to the Slaughter," it was called, the one where the woman killed her husband with a frozen leg of lamb and then cooked it up and served it to the police inspector who was investigating the death.

His trophy head would really look good mounted, up on the wall.

There was no hurry for that. It was keeping good right here. He put it back into the freezer, covered it up, and went back into the house.

He was watching the Discovery channel, a show about lions hunting zebras in Africa, when he heard the garage door mechanism. The door opened and shut. A moment later his wife was in the room, glancing at the television set with more than her usual cursory interest. She wasn't much for watching television; she had her many activities that kept her busy.

He looked up. "Must've been a short book," he commented. He liked shows like this, wildlife documentaries. He would love some-

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day to go big-game hunting in Africa, but there wasn't hardly any left anymore, and besides, you had to be a millionaire to do that stuff, which he wasn't.

"Nobody was really into it," she told him. She pulled the book out of her large purse, held it up for him to see. The cover looked like a dish from a Chinese restaurant. "I'll read it myself when I have some spare time."

"When do you ever have any spare time?"

"Sometimes I have a hard time getting to sleep."

He looked over at her. "I should try to fix that."

She blushed. "Well . . . that might work." She glanced at her watch, that studied nonchalant look he knew. "Is this a good show?" she asked, looking at the set again. She shrugged out of her coat.

"I like it. You might not. We could watch something else."

"What else is on?"

"I don't know. Probably some sitcoms or something. I know you don't want to watch sports."

"I don't mind, if you want to." She checked the watch on her wrist again. "Let me make one phone call."

"Take your time."

She went into the kitchen, around the corner where he couldn't see her. He heard the pinging sound of her fingers on the telephone touch-pads.

A moment later she came back into the room and sat down next to him on the couch. "Is there anything funny on tonight?" she asked, looking at the wildlife show he was watching. "Some dumb comedy?"

"There's always that." He picked up the clicker and ran through a bunch of channels until *Seinfeld* came on.

"I've seen this a few times," she said as she recognized some of the people in the cast. "This is pretty good."

"Yeah, it is." He liked *Seinfeld.*

They sat together, watching. After a moment she moved closer to him, so that they were touching.

She didn't go out the next night. Tuesday was her bridge night, but two of the women had come down with the flu, so the group cancelled.

They stayed home together, watched some television, and went to bed early.

They made love for the first time in more than two months.

4.

The following night she did go out. She stayed out a long time. He was still up when she came home. Usually he was in bed when she was out late, but this time he wasn't.

"How come you're up?" she asked, startled at seeing him. She

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wasn't expecting him to be up. Seeing him sitting in front of the television set, she turned away from him.

"I was watching a movie. Then I thought, why not wait up for you?"

She turned her face to him. "That was nice."

She had been crying. Whenever she cried her eyes got puffy and stayed that way for hours. Even if she washed her face and put ice cubes or cucumber slices on her eyes, they were still puffy. Frog eyes, she called them.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. It's . . . there was this one kid . . ."

Wednesday night was Red Cross volunteer night. She would go to local old-age homes, or to the Children's Hospital, two towns over. A lot of the kids in the hospital were dying from different terminal diseases. The volunteers would read to the kids, play games with them, do whatever they could to cheer them up a little. Some of the kids came from homes hundreds of miles away, and rarely saw their families. Some of the kids had no families, their parents were crackheads or junkies or criminals who had lost their child long ago.

"That must be hard."

She nodded. "I really don't feel very good. I'm going up to bed."

He made sure all the doors were locked and the alarm system was on, turned off the lights, and followed her to bed. They didn't make love, but he held her comfortingly in his arms.

5.

She didn't look good. She lost some weight, her complexion was pallid. Three nights running now she'd stayed home. She hadn't stayed home three nights running for over a year. And the few nights she had gone out, she'd come home much earlier than normal.

He had been out. Bowling. The one night in the week he went out.

She was watching television. It was like they had changed places, reversed roles; him out, her home. He fixed himself a 7&7. "Want one?" he asked her.

She started to say no, then changed her mind. "A short one. Thank you."

He fixed her drink and came in and sat down next to her. "How're you doing?" he asked.

"Okay." She shrugged, took a sip.

"You look kind of peaked," he said.

"There's a ton of flu going around. Half the school has it."

He knocked back some of his drink. "Take a lot of vitamin C."

"That's a good idea. I will."

He turned to her. "Have you ever run across a fellow named

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Wally Lombardo? He's got an office-supply business, the school probably buys office supplies from him."

She brought her drink down, placed it on the coffee table in front of her. She thought for a moment. "Yes, I think I have."

"Good-looking guy? Big head of curly black hair?"

"I know who you're talking about."

"Some of the fellows that know him say he's slept with half the women in town."

She was looking at the television screen.

"He's apparently been hot and heavy with some married woman the past year. Clandestine motel trysts, that kind of stuff."

She picked up her drink and brought it to her mouth. "What about him?"

"He's been missing for about a week. The rumor is he and this married woman ran off together." He paused. "Do you know Frank Destefino?"

She nodded. "I know Frank."

"He and Wally are buddies. Frank doesn't know who this married woman is Wally's supposedly having the affair with, but he knows there is someone. Frank was saying that people were starting to get worried about Wally. They were talking about calling the police. Have them go over to his place, see what's going on there. A bachelor like that, no attachments, he could have a heart attack or a stroke, nobody would know about it for weeks."

"Go to his place?"

"To see if he's in there dead."

"He isn't dead."

He turned to her. "How would you know?"

"Because it doesn't make sense. If somebody was dead in their apartment for a week, wouldn't somebody know? The landlord or the mailman or somebody. It would smell, wouldn't it?"

He nodded. "Unless the heat wasn't on. In weather like this, if the heat isn't on, a body could freeze up for months."

She finished her drink. "I'm going to bed."

"You should. You don't look good." He watched her stand up. "I think the police are going to go over there tomorrow morning. If he isn't there, they might at least find out where he is." He stood up, heading for the kitchen and a refill on his drink. "Or who the mystery woman is. She might could give them a lead, if they could find out who she is."

6.

She was sautéeing chicken-fried steak at the stove when she heard him come in. Chicken-fried steak was one of his favorite dishes. He always came in the same way, one determined foot in front of the other. Solid, dependable. No frills, no nonsense. He was like that in

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every aspect of his life. A meat-and-potatoes kind of guy. It made life dull sometimes, which was why she had another life outside the marriage, but who he was also gave her a strong feeling of security, of being taken care of. He would always be there for her. But it wasn't as exciting a life as she wanted to have.

"Smells good."

"Thanks. It won't be long."

He washed his hands at the sink and fixed himself a drink. "The police went over to the apartment." He sipped his drink, leafed through the day's mail that was stacked on the counter. Bills. And *Sports Illustrated.* He'd read it after dinner.

She turned the steaks in the pan, adding a dash of tabasco for flavor. The potatoes had been mashed. They were warming in the oven. She had made a Caesar salad as well.

"It was empty. Completely cleaned out."

Her hand holding the pounded steak by a fork stopped in midair. "What are you talking about?"

"Wally Lombardo's apartment. The office-supply guy I told you was missing."

"What about him?" She stirred in a teaspoon more of flour to thicken the gravy a tad.

"His apartment is empty. Stripped bare. He moved out." He drank some of his bourbon. "And here's the strange thing. He didn't leave a forwarding address."

She moved the steaks around in the fry pan. "That is strange."

"Frank told me this," he said. "He's as baffled as anyone."

"I can imagine."

"You'd think if someone was leaving town they'd tell their friends. I'll bet he told that married woman."

"Maybe. You never know." She took the bowl of warming mashed potatoes out of the oven and set it on the counter, poured a little of the cream gravy over it from the skillet, and added in some butter, mashing the mixture together with a fork. Then she shook some pepper on top and mixed that in.

"His landlord told the police that Bekin's was by, emptied the place out. Everything's in storage."

The table had been set. She placed two portions of chicken-fried steak and a large dollop of mashed potatoes on his plate, one piece of meat and a smaller amount of potatoes on her own. She put salad into the bowls.

He helped her carry the dishes to the table. "This smells great, honey."

"You're a pleasure to cook for."

They sat down. He began attacking his food. "Frank thinks Wally may have been involved in some strange shenanigans

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lately," he said. "He might have been in trouble with the law and decided to make tracks."

"You hear rumors like that whenever somebody goes away," she said. She took a bite of the meat. It tasted good, but she didn't have much of an appetite.

He bit into a piece of his own steak. "There's rumors about everything," he agreed. "Mostly that's all they are. Rumors."

7.

The following week he had another piece of news about the man who had disappeared. "He was in trouble with the law, all right."

They were in the bedroom, folding laundry. He was a good laundry-folder; his creases were razor-sharp.

"Who?"

"Wally Lombardo. The fellow who emptied out his apartment and didn't leave a forwarding address. The post office is returning all his mail to sender."

"In trouble with the law?" She refolded a dish towel that she hadn't got quite right.

"For all kinds of stuff. It seems like he was running scams on a whole bunch of people."

She nodded. "Does anybody care?" she asked after a minute.

He shook his head. "I don't think so. Since he didn't have a family and worked his own one-man business." He folded a pair of her underpants. He liked the way they felt in his hands.

"Do you want to go to a movie tonight?" she asked.

"Don't you have your knitting group tonight? Or what is it, the book club?"

"I'd rather go out with you." She hadn't been going to any of her groups hardly at all for the past several weeks.

He smiled at her. "You've got a date."

The movie wasn't that great, but they had a good time out together anyway. He liked getting out with her, they needed to do it more often. She had a good time, too.

After the movie they stopped in a nice quiet bar and each had a glass of wine. Then they went home and made love. He made sure she climaxed before he did.

8.

Spring was a long time coming, almost to the end of April, but when it did it burst forth in riotous bloom in the mountains. People started hiking the trails, even the tough, almost-impenetrable ones that were covered over with a winter's worth of heavy undergrowth.

The hikers, a hardy middle-aged Scandinavian couple who had trekked all over Europe and the Himalayas and didn't find this terrain too forbidding, came across the traps alongside the trail.

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There were three of them, big ones, with big steel teeth. Whoever had set them had known what he was doing. He had gone to a lot of work, coming in here and setting the traps.

The gnawed-off foot of a large wolf was still caught in the jaws of one of them. The other two were empty. The animal or animals that had sprung them had gotten away unharmed, unlike their less-fortunate brother.

Trapping was illegal, of course. The forest rangers confiscated the traps. If they ever found out who had set them, the son of a bitch would never hunt in these mountains again.

Besides the traps, there was a pile of bones off to one side. They had been polished by the elements and the scavengers that had picked them clean.

They were human bones; that was easy to figure out. Maybe they belonged to the man who had set the illegal traps. If they did, whatever had happened to him was poetic justice, of a rough form.

Maybe the wolves that had escaped being trapped had attacked and killed him. This many months later it would be impossible to tell who the poacher was.

Particularly since the head was missing.

9.

She had showered, washed her hair, put on one of her sexiest dresses, and iced a bottle of champagne.

"What's the occasion?" he asked, taking it all in. He had come home right after work—she had called and told him she had a surprise for him. "You look pretty," he added.

She did look pretty. She had been looking pretty for the past couple of months.

"Thanks. I feel pretty." She kissed him lightly on the lips. Then she popped the bottle of champagne and poured two glasses. She handed one to him.

He looked at her, wondering.

"I'm pregnant."

He felt his breath catch in his chest.

"Is that all right with you?" She had never been able to get pregnant. For a long time now they had stopped trying.

"It's wonderful." He raised his glass. "To us."

They clinked glasses. "To the three of us."

10.

He stood at the place on the trail where he and his brother had taken their trophy. The traps were gone now. The bones, too, had been cleared away. They had been taken to the state forensic lab for analysis. Without a head, and without any fingerprints, since all the flesh had been chewed off, there was no way of making an

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identification of who the remains belonged to.

The bones would be cremated and buried in a common, unmarked grave.

He took the photographs out of the Manila envelope he had brought with him, the photographs he had taken over the course of several months. He looked at each in turn, carefully, remembering how he had felt when he had originally taken them, and before that, when he had first found out.

It had been a gut-wrenching feeling. A feeling of emptiness, of almost utter despair.

Now there was no feeling. That was in a different lifetime.

He dug a small firepit in the moist spring earth. Spreading the photos in the depression, he poured enough lighter fluid on them to insure that they would burn easily. Then he lit the match to them.

The pictures burned slowly, the ends curling as the flame grew towards the center. The smoke drifted up into the sky.

When the photographs had burned completely, he covered the depression with dirt and smoothed it over with his boot. Then he walked away down the trail.

He had done his hunting here. He wouldn't come to this place again.

11.

She went to bed early. She tired easily now that she was pregnant.

He sat outside in the dark, on the edge of the back deck he'd added on two years ago. It was a warm evening. He was wearing a T-shirt and shorts. His feet were bare. He felt the grass under his feet when he stretched them out over the edge of the deck. It was a well-made deck. He'd done all the work himself, in his spare time.

He finished his beer and went inside. He tossed the bottle into the recycling bin in the kitchen and went through the mud room into the garage.

The open freezer gave off a dry-ice smell. He lifted the various packages, including those of the venison he had taken in deer season. This weekend he'd thaw one of the packages out and they'd have a barbecue. He'd make venison burgers.

Pushing some other packages aside, he reached down to the bottom of the large freezer and pulled out the Ziploc bag. The contents of the bag had formed an unclear opaqueness; you couldn't see inside it from the outside.

He unzipped the bag and lifted out the contents.

He had been coming out to the freezer all winter and spring, at least once a week. Taking out his prize and looking at it, handling it, exposing it to the air. Too many times, that was obvious now.

The trophy head was going bad. Pretty soon he'd have to throw it away. O

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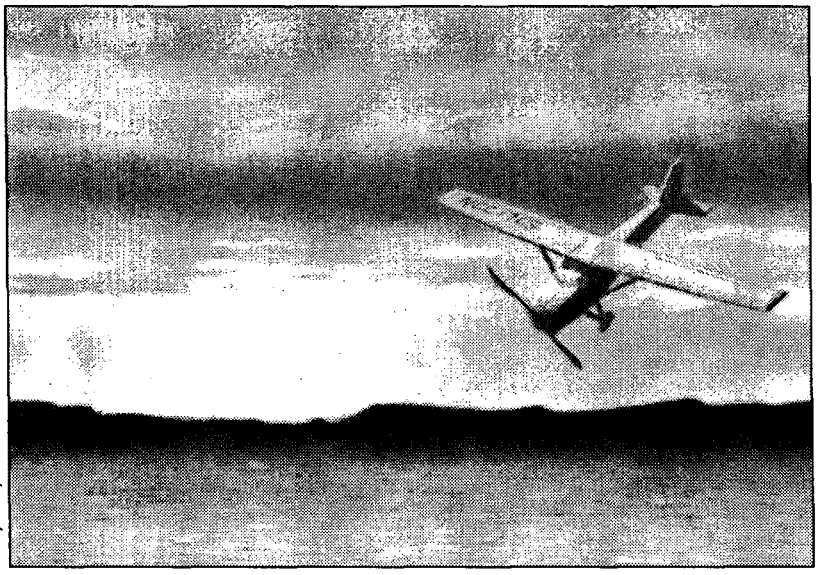

Art by Darryl Elliott

The Big Shuffle

by Clark Howard

Jack Nash had not even sat down at his desk on Monday morning when his boss, Sam Spear, the company's Director of Claims, came briskly into his office with a file folder in his hand.

"Where the hell have you been for two days?" he asked gruffly. "I've been trying to get hold of you since noon Saturday."

"I went down to Ensenada," Nash replied undefensively. "Did a little albacore fishing. Laid on the beach. Drank tequila. It's a primitive custom called enjoying the weekend."

Spear was a beefy, overbearing man of sixty, with a widely held reputation throughout California All-Risk Liability Company of being able to frighten subordinates with a mere glance. Nash, his best claims investigator, was the one person who was never intimidated by him.

"I don't suppose you're up on the news," Spear said. It was actually an accusation.

"The only news that interests me on weekends is the weather report, Sam." Nash sat down at his desk while Spear dropped his

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heavy bulk into one of the chairs facing it and tossed the file folder over to him.

"Eureka Petroleum," Spear said. "One of their company planes went down in a lake up in northern Nevada late Friday afternoon. Pilot survived, but one of their vice presidents, Richard Tenney, sank with the plane. We carry a blanket policy for a million on all the company officers."

"With P, T, and A?" Nash asked, opening the folder.

In his introduction to his new short story collection, *Challenge the Widowmaker,* Clark Howard talks of a common element to all his stories: "That characteristic is the quality of pride... manifesting itself in surprising ways at unexpected times, giving... desperate people the mind and muscle... to get through another day, and hopefully get another chance."

"With P, T, and A," Spear confirmed. P, T, and A was insurance jargon for Planes, Trains, and Automobiles. It was a clause that doubled the amount of insurance payable if an insured was killed while on company business as a passenger on any of those modes of transportation.

"What brought the plane down?" Nash asked.

"Don't know yet. It's at the bottom of Ghost Lake, along with Tenney. The lake's in the Granite Mountains, six or seven thousand feet up, and it's deep, very deep: fourteen, fifteen hundred feet. They've had divers looking for the plane and Tenney's body for two days, but no luck yet. The lake is four miles wide and twelve miles long. I've been on the phone with the local sheriff up there; he's not too optimistic. Says there's half a dozen or more bodies in there already—fishermen, boaters, swimmers—that have never been recovered."

"Ghost Lake," said Nash. "Aptly named, apparently. What's the pilot say?"

"He hasn't been questioned too extensively yet; he's hospitalized for exposure. Wandered around half the night soaking wet before he found a fishing lodge to get help. All he's said so far is that the engine was missing badly and in danger of quitting. Says he either had to try a lake landing or risk a crash in the trees." Spear rose and adjusted his ample belly back under his vest and belt. "Anyway, my notes are all there. I want you to handle this, Jack. You're the best man I've got. Get up to Ghost Lake and start digging in every direction to see if you can find a reason to deny this claim. Company can't afford to take a two-million-dollar hit this quarter. This could affect our bonuses for the whole year."

The phone rang on Nash's desk. He answered and handed it to Spear. "Nelson in data processing, for you."

Spear took the phone. "Hello—yes—Richard Tenney—T-E-N-N-E-Y, that's right." The burly man frowned. "What! Are you

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sure? Social Security numbers and birth dates match?" His face reddened. "Son of a *bitch!*" He slammed the phone down.

"Another policy?" Nash asked, raising his eyebrows. He had worked for Sam Spear for ten years and knew what detonated the older man.

"Yes, goddamn it! A personal policy! Half a million!"

"With P, T, and A?"

"Oh, yes! Of course!"

"That raises the death benefit to three million."

"I can add, Jack!" His face turned redder. "We've been double-shuffled!" A double shuffle was when an insured managed to obtain two policies for an amount in excess of what would have been allowed, according to his age and health, in a single policy.

Nash opened the credenza behind his desk and from a small refrigerator got out and opened a bottle of Pellegrino. Coming around the desk with it, he said, "Here, take one of your pills, Sam, before you have a stroke."

Spear fingered a tiny white pill from his vest pocket and quickly swallowed it with the cold sparkling water. After a few breaths, he started to relax. Presently he gave Jack what he perceived to be a kind, fatherly smile. "You know, my boy, I may be getting too old for all this pressure." He put an arm around Nash's shoulders. "You know what? If we can find a way to deny this claim, so that I can go out on a high note, I'm going to put in for retirement and recommend you for my job. Let you move up."

"You've been saying that for five years, Sam."

"But this time I mean it," Spear insisted. "It's time. And you've earned it, Jack. Especially if you get us out from under this one. You know as well as I do, Jack, that we're not Prudential or General America or one of those other giants. California All-Risk is a small regional company. A claim like this can impact our earnings two, even three years down the line. Impact my retirement, too. Find us an out on this one, my boy," he patted Nash's back, "and not only will the claims director job be yours, but you'll be a hero at California All-Risk. A living legend."

Spear left the office, taking the bottle of Pellegrino with him. Nash returned to his desk and dialed an in-company number. Presently the ring was answered by a female voice with a pronounced Southern drawl.

"Typing pool. This is Stella."

"Hi. It's me."

"Hi, there. Is your back sunburned?"

"A little. I felt it a couple of minutes ago when Sam put his arm around me."

"Did he give you his retirement speech again?"

"Complete with promises of glory," Nash said pragmatically.

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"Listen, I won't be able to make supper tonight. I have to go over to Nevada on a big claim we're going to get hit with."

"That the corporate plane that crashed in some lake?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Two secretaries from sales were talking about it in the john earlier. Will you be gone long?"

"Couple of days is all. Unless I find something funny, of course."

"Call me?"

"You know I will. You sunburned?"

"Just where my bikini bottom tied on the sides. But it was a fun weekend."

"Want to do it again?"

"Any time, sugar."

"Good." He looked at his watch. "I'd better get going."

"Travel safe, hear?"

"I will. 'Bye."

"'Bye, now."

Hanging up, Nash left his hand on the receiver and thought about Stella. She was from a small town in Georgia and had come to Los Angeles with her husband to work for Pacific Telephone when they were both nineteen. Before long, Stella was pregnant, and her husband was out partying every night, drinking and smoking stuff with his buddies from work. Stella lost the baby and ultimately left her husband. On her own for five years, she had been seeing Nash for a year, seriously for half that time. He was fourteen years older than she, but Stella didn't seem to mind. Never one to be totally at ease around women, Nash felt he had found a comfortable niche with Stella. He liked everything about her, from the naturally unrestrained drawl of her speech, to the spontaneous humor of her personality, to the abundance of her healthy body and uninhibited libido. And she liked him because all of his excesses were practiced in private, with her. That was all Stella required of a man. Practice gluttony, drunkenness, sexual perversion, whatever—just do it at home with me, sugar.

That suited Jack Nash just fine. Maybe, he thought, after half a dozen false starts over the years, he had found a woman to keep.

While his hand was still on the receiver, Nash's phone rang.

"Jack Nash," he answered.

"You still here?" Sam Spear asked incisively.

"Just leaving, Sam," Nash answered. He hung up and left.

Nash flew to Reno, rented a car, and started driving north. He had fifty miles of decent scenery and good highway up to and around the bottom shore of Pyramid Lake, then began a hundred miles of steadily worsening blacktop that took him through dry flats, lava beds, and alkali prairies that looked like moonscapes.

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After five hours, he reached the stark foothills of the Granite Range and began a slow, steady climb on narrow, snaky roads from four thousand feet up to sixty-seven hundred. There he found high, green meadows, thick pine forests, and crystal streams of clear, cold water. When he rounded a bend and pulled into the little mountain town of Cascade, just before sunset, he felt like he was driving into a picture postcard, it was that pretty.

An attendant at the town's one service station directed him to the sheriff's office. It was a compact brick building with a public room in front, two jail cells in back, and a small private office off to one side for the sheriff, a ruddy outdoors-looking man about Nash's age.

"Sheriff Dan Bosey?" Nash asked, sticking his head in the door. "I'm Jack Nash, claims investigator for California All-Risk Liability Company in Los Angeles. I believe you spoke on the phone with Sam Spear, our director of claims."

"Sure did," Bosey said, rising. "Come on in." He extended his hand. "Like some coffee?"

"Sure would." Nash shook hands. "Pretty little town you have here."

"Whole country's pretty up here on the mountain," said Bosey with a smile. "It's getting *to* it that's not so pretty." He poured Nash a cup of coffee from an old-fashioned metal pot on a hotplate in the corner. "Sugar's there. No cream, sorry."

"Black's fine." Nash sat. "Has the plane been found yet?"

"Nope. Not likely to be, either. I told your boss first time I talked to him not to get his hopes up. Look here." He handed Nash an eight-by-ten plat diagram showing a cutaway side view of Granite Peak, the mountain they were on, and Ghost Lake, which lay in its center at the top. "Elevation here is sixty-seven hundred and twenty-two feet. Ghost Lake is four miles wide, twelve miles long, and fourteen hundred and twenty feet deep—*and* it's a spreader lake. That means that it's bigger at the bottom than it is at the top. The walls of the lake bed stay pretty much the same nearly all the way down: about four-by-twelve miles, just like at the top. But at the *bottom,* the bed spreads out just like the mountain does and expands to something like eight-by-twenty miles, with a depth of maybe thirty feet. Just picture a huge mountain cavern down there, only it's filled with water. Anything sinking vertically to the bottom then starts floating off in some horizontal direction in the surrounding cavern. It could go anywhere the water movement takes it, for miles, before it settles. *Or,* it might not settle at all; it might just keep moving until it rots away to nothing."

"So you don't think the diving operation will be successful?" Nash asked. Bosey shook his head.

"In the fifty-eight years since the town was incorporated back in 1941, which was when we started keeping official records, there's

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been six swimmers, four fishermen, and nine boaters lost in Ghost Lake, along with five boats. Not one body and not one boat has ever been brought up. Only thing we ever find is surface debris, pieces that broke off of something, or articles of clothing, like a shoe. Believe me, Mr. Nash, when something or somebody goes down in Ghost Lake, it *stays* down. It can't be found, and it can't be brought up."

"Sheriff, you sound very convinced of what you're saying," Nash offered, "but I have to ask you whether it's a completely reasonable conclusion? After all, divers found the *Titanic* in the Atlantic Ocean and brought articles up from an incredible depth."

The sheriff shrugged. "Sure. And it cost tens of millions of dollars to do it. The state of Nevada pays thirty thousand for a diving operation to find someone that drowns in one of its lakes. When that amount gets used up, usually in about three days, the operation is terminated unless an outside source agrees to pick up the tab to continue it. Now maybe California All-Risk or Eureka Petroleum is willing to spend millions of dollars for an unlimited dive operation, in which case there's probably a chance of success. But remember, there's a hundred and sixty square miles of water down there that can't be reached by underwater detection devices because it's got fourteen hundred feet of rock on top of it. So those hundred and sixty square miles will have to be searched visually, with underwater lighting, about six feet at a time." Bosey shook his head. "Big job, Mr. Nash. Mighty big job."

Nash nodded thoughtfully. "You're a very convincing man, Sheriff." He finished his coffee. "Incidentally, where's the pilot?"

"He's in our little hospital out at the edge of town."

"What's his condition?"

"Pretty good. Got two broken fingers, cuts and bruises on his head and shoulders, a banged-up knee, and possible low-grade pneumonia from exposure. But I'd say he's in great shape—considering the other fellow's condition."

Nash looked out the window. It was dark now, the little town's streetlights on. He felt suddenly tired from the long drive, and realized that his sunburn was itching. "Anyplace in town to stay?"

"You bet. Mountaintop Motel, right at the end of Main Street. Couple fellows from Eureka Petroleum already staying there."

"I'd like to go out to the lake in the morning, if that's all right, see the dive site, get some pictures for my report."

"No problem. I go out there about nine. Pick you up, if you like."

"Thanks, Sheriff. I appreciate that. How about seeing the pilot?"

"That's up to the doctors, but I'm sure it'll be all right."

"You've been very helpful, Sheriff," Nash said, rising. "Thanks for the time."

"See you in the morning," said Bosey.

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As Nash walked out to his rented car, he noticed at once that it was becoming considerably cooler on the mountain now that the sun had gone down. He could only imagine what the water temperature was at the bottom of Ghost Lake. If Sheriff Bosey's description of the lake had been accurate, Richard Tenney's body would, as the high-elevation air got colder during the night, soon resemble a frozen piece of driftwood, wafting slowly through miles of underwater caverns. Not a very peaceful grave, he thought. And immediately wondered: Or was it?

Hunching his shoulders against the cold, Nash got into his car and headed for the Mountaintop Motel.

After checking into the motel, Nash called Sam Spear, knowing the director of claims would still be in the office. Spear liked to brag that he only worked half days—twelve hours.

"Doesn't look like we'll get the body up, Sam," he told Spear. "It's at the bottom of a high-elevation spreader lake, floating around in subterranean caverns. It's doubtful we'll get the plane up, either, unless maybe it broke up and some pieces surface. I'll know more tomorrow after I've been out to the dive site."

"That's bad, Jack, very bad. Without a body, we can't eliminate foul play between the pilot and the victim. And without the plane, we can't eliminate malicious tampering or industrial sabotage."

"I know, Sam. But from what I've learned so far, the cost of a possibly successful dive for either one would be exorbitant. Not at all cost-effective for a three million payout."

"Forget cost-effectiveness!" Spear stormed. "There's not going to be any three million payout! Now listen to me, Jack," his voice took on an urgency, "we've got to start digging. There's got to be a glitch there someplace. Now you start asking questions up there. Find out if the pilot was suicidal in any way. Or whether he had a bottle of booze stashed in the cockpit. The victim's wife is the beneficiary on both policies; find out if the pilot knew her at all. I want to know why we were double-shuffled on these two policies. Hell, nobody's life is worth three million bucks, not even mine."

"I'll get to work on all the angles, Chief," said Nash, because that was what Spear wanted to hear. And Spear loved to be called "Chief."

"Remember, my boy, that claims director job is waiting for you."

Yeah, right, Nash thought as he hung up.

It was too early yet for him to call Stella; he liked to save that for the last thing at night, when he was already in bed, because they had a phone-sex game they liked to play. So he put his coat back on and hurried across Main Street through the chill night air to the Hi Mountain Cafe. He hadn't a clue what kind of place it was, but when he got past the steamed-up windows he found a

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neat little establishment run by Mom, Pop, and two daughters who waited tables. Nash ordered the day's Supper Special, a trout plate with French fries and coleslaw.

While Nash was eating, two executive-looking types came in with a Sharon Stone look-alike who had two inches of a better body all the way around. Nash figured the two were the men from Eureka Petroleum that the sheriff had mentioned, and the blonde was probably either the widow of the geologist who went down with the plane, or the pilot's wife. Probably the latter. Pilots always seemed to marry well-built blondes; they seemed to go well with the image.

Nash didn't bother going over and introducing himself. He liked to keep as low a profile as possible with people until it became necessary to talk to them. So he finished his supper alone, went back over to the motel, got a bag of chips and a can of pop out of the vending machine, and snacked while he watched part of a fight card being telecast on cable from Reno. Finally, when he noticed his earlier fatigue returning, he took a warm shower to soothe his sunburn, climbed into bed, and called Stella.

"Hi, it's me," he said when she answered.

"Hi, sugar. Where are you?"

"Little town called Cascade, up in the Granite Mountains of Nevada."

"Oh, the adventurous life of a claims investigator," she kidded. "Cold up there?"

"Cold as a well-digger's ass."

"How's the room? You warm enough?"

"I'm fine. Had some good trout for dinner."

"Waitress pretty?"

"Yeah, I guess. If a guy likes high-school girls who still have their baby fat. Which I don't."

"That's my good boy," Stella purred.

They talked a little about the claim and the fact that it looked bad for California All-Risk. Three million was by far the largest claim the comparatively small firm had ever been faced with paying. It had paid a one-million-dollar claim some years earlier when a personal-liability insured had gone postal over a job review and killed his supervisor and two coworkers. But aside from that incident, the company's annual payouts had been remarkably modest when measured against premiums received. Of course, Sam Spear had foiled three other million-dollar claims on policy technicalities and investigative evidence, making him the legend in his own mind that he thought he was. And now, of course, he was trying, with Nash's help, to do it again—on the company's largest claim yet.

"Someone said at lunch today," Stella told him, "that a claim this big might bankrupt the company."

"That's nonsense," Nash said. "We're a privately owned com-

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pany. A hit like this would hurt the owners and the employees for the next two or three years, but the company would survive."

"I'm glad to hear that," Stella drawled. "I don't want to have to look for a job."

"You wouldn't have any trouble finding work. Any typing pool in L. A. would be happy to get those fast fingers of yours."

"Hmmmm, I know. But I like the job I've got. It's easy. Lets me save my fast fingers for other things."

That was his opening. "Such as?"

"Well, let me see now . . ."

She started to talk, beginning their game of telephone intimacy. Soon Nash reached over and turned off the light. It was easier to see what she was saying in the dark.

Early the next morning, Nash ate a Hi Mountain breakfast special across the street, then rode out to Ghost Lake with Sheriff Bosey. The Nevada State Rescue and Recovery Team was already at work when they got there. One diver was in the water, another was preparing to go off the edge of the dive barge, and two others were suiting up for their own dive times. Divers went in at thirty-minute intervals, stayed down one hour, were up for one hour, then back down for another hour, until three dive cycles had been completed. With dive times spaced thirty minutes apart, there were always two divers in the water at the same time except for the first and last half hours of the six-hour search day.

The large dive barge was about a mile out from shore. There was a small speedboat moored next to it for transport to and from the narrow, man-made, rough sand beach. Parked back up from the lakeside were several state vehicles, including a huge tractor-trailer rig with a crane on it, which was used to lift and transport the barge. A number of civilian cars and pickups belonging to locals who had come out to watch the operation were parked farther back, toward the highway.

Sheriff Bosey parked next to the tractor rig and cut the engine. "Bert Cooper, the state dive master, is in charge out there," he said. Unhooking the dashboard mike, he radioed the barge. "Recovery, this is Cascade One, come in, please." Within seconds there was a reply.

"Cascade One, this is Recovery. That you, Dan?"

"Yeah, it's me, Bert. I have Mr. Nash from the insurance company with me over here on shore to take some pictures. Can you give us a quick inventory of everything you've found so far."

"No change from about noon yesterday, Dan," said Cooper. "We've got a total of three pieces of the aircraft. Two were floaters, on the water when we got here: a broken-off section of propeller about fourteen inches long, and a section of fuselage measuring about eighteen-by-twenty inches, which looks to me like it came off

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the underside of a wing. The third piece is a section of tail stabilizer that was found floating at about eight hundred feet; looks like it probably snapped off from water pressure as the plane sank."

"Engine?" Nash asked the sheriff.

"Bert—?"

"I heard," said Cooper. "Not much chance of finding it. Something that heavy went clean to the bottom of twenty feet of silt wherever the plane hit. Maybe it broke out of the fuselage and went down by its lonesome, or maybe it dragged the plane with it. Either way, the hole closed in on top of it. Take six months to find it, less'n you got very damn lucky."

"Anything else?" the sheriff asked his passenger. Nash shook his head. "Thanks, Bert," said Bosey. "You packing it in after today?"

"That's affirmative," said Cooper. "I'll stop in and say *adios.*"

"Ten-four," said Bosey, and hung up the microphone. "Want me to run you out to the hospital now to see the pilot?"

"If it's not too much trouble," said Nash. "Just let me take a few quick pictures first."

Nash uncased a 35mm Handlemann with a telephoto lens and took a series of photographs on a one-hundred-eighty-degree swing from where the sheriff's car was parked. Then he got back in the cruiser and Bosey drove away. "I'll introduce you to Dr. Smalley, who heads up our little hospital," the sheriff said on the way.

The Cascade Regional Medical Center was a fifteen-bed facility with a separate maternity ward and basic surgery unit. It had two administrative employees, three general nurses, one general-surgery nurse, and a resident physician, all under the supervision of Dr. Leo Smalley, who had come to town to fly-fish twenty years earlier, fallen in love with the little mountain community, and stayed to build a hospital and become its chief of medicine. He fished every day from eleven to two, even when he had to cut a hole in the ice to do it.

Dr. Smalley was tying a fly as he spoke with Nash and the sheriff about Cliff Logan, the Eureka Petroleum pilot who had survived the crash.

"We'll probably release him in a couple of days," Dr. Smalley said, "soon's the swelling in his knee goes down. Knee wasn't broken, but there is a minor hairline fracture and some very deep bruising. He'll limp for a while and need some therapy. Also got a broken forefinger and middle finger on his right hand, but both set all right. Contusions and abrasions on his head and upper torso are no problem. Symptoms of pneumonia were false; just respiratory stress and fever from being wet in the woods most of the night."

"Any objection to my interviewing him?" Nash asked.

"None at all. He's in room eight, down the hall." The doctor looked at the sheriff. "They going to have that damned barge off

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my lake today, Dan?"

"Looks like, Doc."

"Good. Disturbs my fish."

Nash left them and walked down to room eight. The door was open. When he stepped inside, he saw that the blond woman from the cafe the previous night was sitting near the window, looking through a magazine. Their eyes met and she said quietly, "I'm afraid he's asleep right now."

"No," a voice said from the bed, "I'm awake." Cliff Logan used a control to raise the head of his bed to a half-sitting position. "Can I help you?"

"Jack Nash, claims investigator for California All-Risk Liability Company," Nash said, handing Logan a business card. "We carry the blanket life policy on Eureka Petroleum's executives. You feel up to a few routine questions?"

"Sure. The personnel director of Eureka is in town and came to visit me yesterday. He said there'd probably be someone coming around to see me. Said I was to cooperate fully."

"Glad to hear it," said Nash. "Claims are always settled more quickly when everyone cooperates." He drew a chair alongside the bed and sat down. "Any idea what caused the crash?"

"Wasn't a crash," Logan said firmly. "It was an emergency landing." He had a square jaw, unshaven for a few days, and a brush crew cut, giving him an old-fashioned B-movie convict look.

"Okay," Nash said agreeably, "what caused the emergency landing?"

"Fuel leak of some kind. The engine just started missing. First thing I thought of was a clogged fuel line, almost like when a fuel valve ices up, except it wasn't cold enough for that to happen. I knew I shouldn't be running low, because I had refueled in Boise after Dick and I flew up from Reno—"

"What was the purpose of that trip anyway?" Nash asked. He didn't really need to know right then, but he liked to interrupt a person's story in its early stage to see if it would throw the person off.

"Well, Dick was the vice president of leasing rights and the company's geologist. He was going up to southwest Idaho to get some soil and rock samples from the Hagerman Fossil Beds. He'd had a hunch for a long time that there might be oil under those beds. It was an exploratory trip."

"I see. Go on," Nash said.

"Where was I? Oh yeah, the fuel line. I knew I'd started with enough fuel and my gauges didn't indicate a problem. But about that time, I smelled fuel in the cockpit. I looked around but didn't see any leakage. Then I felt down beside my seat on the port side and discovered that the fire wall there was cold and damp. Then I knew fuel was seeping out of the tank, very slowly, probably through a tiny

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crack. It was such a slow seepage that it wasn't radically affecting the gauges yet. But I knew that sooner or later the fuel gauge would suddenly drop from maybe half full to bone empty. Make a long story short, I was flying over very barren northern Nevada wilderness and hadn't the slightest idea how much fuel I had left. For all I knew, I could lose power any minute. Then it would have been a crash. At that point, I decided to find a place for an emergency landing, while I still had some power left to control the plane."

"Was Ghost Lake the first place you came to?"

"No, third. We flew over a couple of smaller lakes first, but I wanted more room. The flight map showed a bigger lake not far ahead. So that was the one I picked."

"Did you radio your position?"

"Tried to, but I couldn't throw a signal. I was too low in the mountains by then. I'd have had to get altitude to guarantee a signal, and I was afraid I might not have enough fuel to make the climb."

"What kind of plane was it?" Nash asked, even though the file Sam Spear had given him contained that information.

"A Bolo-Horizon J20," Logan said.

"I'm not familiar with that one."

"Single-engine, cabin-type monoplane," Logan replied. "Air-cooled reciprocating engine, fixed-pitch propeller. Nice little ship. Handles easily, can get in and out of small places. Carries a pilot plus three."

"Your passenger, Tenney, wasn't a pilot, was he?"

"No. I'm Eureka's only pilot."

"When you hit the water, what happened?"

"I went in to do a belly-flop, landing gear up, as close to the middle of the lake as I could. I wasn't sure how the plane would take it, whether it would crack up or not. So I instructed Dick to go out the cabin door as soon after we hit as possible, and I'd go out the sliding port window. That way we wouldn't jam up with each other trying to abandon the plane."

"But Mr. Tenney didn't get out?"

"No. I don't know what happened. Maybe the cabin door jammed from the impact. I barely got out myself; the window turned out to be a tighter squeeze than I thought it would be."

"How'd the plane go under?"

"Tilted forward on its nose. The engine weight was pulling it down when I was halfway out the window. My legs were still inside and I got pulled under as the cockpit submerged. I managed to swim away underwater. When I surfaced, I was maybe thirty feet away and the tail section was just going under."

"No way at all you could have helped Mr. Tenney?"

Logan shook his head emphatically. "No way. I couldn't even see him."

Nash cleared his throat. "I have to ask you a sensitive question,

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Mr. Logan. Might as well get it cleared up now before the formal cause-of-death hearing with the claims adjusters. Was there any animosity or hard feelings of any kind between you and Mr. Tenney? Anything that might be construed as a reason for you *not* helping him get out of the plane?"

"I'll answer that," a female voice interjected. The blond woman walked over from the window. Nash had almost forgotten she was in the room. "I can vouch for the friendship between Cliff and my husband."

"Cliff and your—?"

"I'm Ruth Tenney. Richard Tenney's widow."

Nash's expression registered surprise. He had figured her for the pilot's wife, not the victim's. Wearing a stylish, light green St. John two-piece knit suit, a dark green Givenchy bag slung from one shoulder, the last thing she looked like was a new widow.

"And as long as you're a California All-Risk representative," she said quietly, "I might as well show you something." She opened the Givenchy and removed an envelope. "This is a flight-insurance policy Dick purchased from one of your vending machines at the Reno airport and mailed to me. Cliff said he just did it on the spur of the moment. It's for one million dollars."

Nash's eyes flicked from Ruth Tenney to Cliff Logan and back again. The payout had been raised from three million to four million.

The double shuffle had just become a triple shuffle.

"It's murder," Sam Spear said flatly. "I can smell it. A big shuffle. Three policies, four million payoff. Coincidences like that don't happen in the insurance business. The pilot and the wife killed that poor son of a bitch just as sure as God made little green apples. And you and I, Jack my boy, are going to nail them for it." Spear cocked his basketball-shaped head, squinting across the desk at Nash. "You agree with me, don't you?"

"I agree that *something's* wrong," said Nash. "I'm not sure it's murder."

"What else could it be?" Spear demanded. "You said yourself that they exchanged 'knowing' and 'suggestive' glances when you were with them in that hospital room. You said that in your opinion she didn't look or act like a new widow. Now look, nobody was with Tenney when he bought that vending-machine policy at the Reno airport except the pilot. The same pilot who got out a *window* of the sinking plane while the victim couldn't get out the cabin *door!* They're in it together, I tell you."

"Maybe they are," Nash allowed. "But it still could have been an accident, Sam. A very lucky accident for them—but still an accident. Maybe the cabin door really did jam on impact—"

"Bullshit!" Spear declared. "Tenney didn't get out the cabin door

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because Cliff Logan hit him in the head with something and knocked him unconscious. Why the hell do you think Logan flew over two other lakes to land on that one? Because they *planned* it that way. They *knew* that lake was a spreader. They *knew* the physical evidence of their crime would disappear forever. But, by God," he slammed a fat fist down on his desk, "we're going to get them anyway, Jack! We're going to get them on *circumstantial* evidence!" Spear leaped from his chair with surprising dexterity for his size, snatched up the Tenney file, and growled, "Come on!"

"Where to?" asked Nash.

"Herman Golden's office. After you told me about this on the phone yesterday, I set up a meeting with him."

"Herman Golden? I thought you said his fees were too high." Golden was a private detective who specialized in fraudulent insurance claims.

"They are too high," said Spear, "but so is a four-million-dollar payoff."

Golden's office was in a modest but respectable building on the Westwood edge of Santa Monica. It was furnished in California-tacky. Golden himself was somewhere near Sam Spear's age and had been a private detective for twenty years, since retiring from the L. A. County sheriff's office where he'd spent the preceding twenty years. In neither job had he ever been required to raise his hand in anger, even while working the street. A devoutly religious man, he believed in calm reasoning, polite behavior, and fairness. He closed his offices on every Jewish holiday, for himself, and every Catholic holiday, for his wife of forty-two years.

"My, my, my, the things that some people do for money," the detective commented after Sam Spear had outlined the facts of the claim for him. "All people have to do in life is work hard and save diligently, and they'll end up just as well-off. Don't you agree, Sam?"

"Herman, at your exorbitant hourly rate, I don't want to listen to any personal philosophical theories," Spear carped. "Let's stick to business. I'll tell you how I want this handled. I want around-the-clock surveillance on both Cliff Logan and Ruth Tenney. I want deep background checks on both of them. I want discreet, off-the-record interviews with superiors, peers, and subordinates at Eureka Petroleum, as well as neighbors around both residences. And I want everything you do to be coordinated with Jack here; he's to work right along with you so that I can be kept up to speed on everything."

"No problem," said Golden. "Jack and I have worked together before."

"All right, then," said Spear, getting up to leave. "I'm putting it in your hands. I've got forty-five days before the claim has to be paid or formally denied. There's a board of directors meeting in four weeks. I want to be able to go in there and recommend a

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denial of the claim and have it approved. I'm counting on you two to make that happen." He patted Nash on the shoulder. "Jack, my boy, you know what's in it for you if we pull this one off."

After Spear left, Nash and Golden looked at each other knowingly. "Same old Sam," said the private detective. "Still holding out the carrot. He'll probably be in that claims-director job until he drops dead."

"You just might be right," Nash agreed.

He was surprised to find that the thought of Sam Spear dropping dead was not unpleasant to him.

They worked the deep background checks first, Nash doing Cliff Logan and Golden taking Ruth Tenney. Through accessing of public records, beginning with voter registrations and driver's licenses, they developed past addresses, which they sent out for subsequent neighborhood canvasses by out-of-town agencies. Soon they learned that Cliff Logan had lived in Las Vegas, Oklahoma City, and Honolulu. Ruth Tenney had resided in Dayton, Hollywood, and Reno.

"No residential matches," said Golden.

Logan's pilot's license showed that he had learned to fly in the Marine Corps, and after discharge had logged flying hours as a crop duster in Oklahoma, piloting inter-island commuter flights in Hawaii, and later flying between Las Vegas and Reno for a small, regional airline called Las Reno Air.

Ruth Tenney, maiden name Ruth Slott, had left Ohio to try acting school in Hollywood, done some modeling, and finally been a pole dancer for a while before giving up on California and moving to Reno, where she took dancing lessons and ultimately landed a job in the revue line at the Miramar Hotel's showroom.

"Reno might be a match," said Nash. "Ruth lived there, Logan flew in and out."

Golden nodded. "I'll check with Las Reno Air." After he had done it, he said, "Bingo. When Las Reno flight crews overnighted up north, they stayed at the Miramar."

Sam Spear was almost maniacally gleeful when Nash reported that news to him. "I knew it! They're a couple of losers: a hoochy-cooch dancer and a hobo pilot."

"Doesn't make them murderers," Nash demurred.

"It will, it will! Keep digging. Find out how a tramp like her hooked a geologist for a husband."

The marriage license showed that Ruth Marie Slott had married Richard Alan Tenney in front of a Justice of the Peace in Reno thirteen months earlier. A check with coworkers who remembered her from the Miramar revue said that she had met Dick Tenney when a petroleum association had booked the entire showroom during a convention and the dancers were paid extra to circulate among the mostly male guests after the show. Tenney had invited Ruth to dinner, she had accepted, and a month later they were married.

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"What a *schmuck* this Tenney must have been," Golden groaned. "He should have found himself a nice schoolteacher or librarian."

But Sam Spear was delighted. "Nice guy falls for tramp, just like I figured," he boasted. "Now," he licked his lips in anticipation, "find me out these two answers: One, how long after the marriage was it before Cliff Logan was hired as Eureka Petroleum's company pilot; and two, what did other people think of the Tenney marriage?"

The first part was easy. Cliff Logan had been hired by Eureka eight months earlier, which was five months after the Tenneys married. The previous pilot had been fired after the wife of a Eureka executive reported that he had fondled her in the company parking lot when she came to pick up her husband after work. The executive's wife was Ruth Tenney.

As for the state of the Tenney marriage, Nash checked that one out himself. He flew to Reno, drove to Fallon, Nevada, where the company had its headquarters, and made some discreet inquiries of the Tenneys' neighbors. What he learned, by this time, did not surprise him. Richard Tenney was a navy veteran who had gone to college on the G. I. Bill. He was described as a very low-key, introspective, scholarly type, with thinning light-brown hair. He wore wire-rim eyeglasses, was soft-spoken, thoughtful, even a little shy. Neighbors and coworkers at Eureka Petroleum had unanimously been surprised when he married a vivacious, showy, obviously self-indulgent woman like Ruth Slott. Most acquaintances had predicted that the union would not last six months. Ruth was thought to be far "too much woman" for her somewhat timid husband. A number of wives were known to have begun keeping a close watch on their own husbands in the expectation that it would not be long before Ruth Tenney decided to start "playing around." There had been a collective sigh of relief when the handsome, dark-haired, virile, and *single* Cliff Logan came on board as the new Eureka company pilot. It wasn't long before Ruth began to be seen with him, innocently enough at first, dancing at the company club, on the Eureka bowling team, taking flying lessons in Cliff's spare time. Richard didn't seem to mind; he was convinced they were just friends, and he trusted Ruth. Anyway, as a geologist, rocks were his life, not people.

"Are you convinced now?" Spear asked Nash, after reading this latest report.

"I've always been convinced there was *something* improper regarding the claim," Nash defended himself. "I just couldn't buy your murder theory. I've talked to both of them, Sam, face-to-face. I'm sorry, they just don't *seem* like murderers."

Spear rolled his bulging eyes toward the ceiling. "I'm glad you weren't on the Ted Bundy jury, Jack." He opened a file on his desk. "I've developed a little independent information that might interest

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you, my boy. Remember Cliff Logan's employment record showing him as a pilot for an inter-island commuter airline in Hawaii? To qualify for that job, he had to take training in emergency *water* landing of small aircraft. He finished first in his class. He knew exactly what he was doing when he set down on Ghost Lake; he knew how to get out of the plane, and he knew how to sink it.

"Here's something else. I talked with a couple of other Las Reno pilots and they told me that a year before Cliff Logan quit to go to work for Eureka, he had been dating a blond showgirl from the Miramar. She dumped him and married somebody else. It left Logan pretty bummed out for a while. But a few months later, he started seeing a married woman and seemed to come out of it. The married woman was also a blonde." Spear poked the file with his forefinger. "Same woman, Jack. Ruth Slott Tenney."

"If they've been that crazy about each other for so long," Nash said, "and were still so crazy about each other that they'd commit murder to be together, how do they manage to stay away from each other now? They're never seen together anymore. Neighbors around the Tenney home say Ruth has hardly gone out at all since the accident. And Logan's not even in Fallon anymore; he's living in Reno, getting therapy for his knee. Phone records don't even show that they're calling each other. People who commit murder together keep in touch, Sam. They *have* to, to make sure neither of them is turning on the other. You taught me that, Sam. But these two have gone separate ways since a few days after the accident."

"Wrong," said Spear. "I just got Herman Golden's latest surveillance report an hour ago. They've been meeting at the Top Dollar Motel down at the edge of Carson City. It's an hour's drive from Fallon, and an hour's drive from Reno. They meet every other night, usually between midnight and three. The neighbors don't see Ruth leave because the neighbors are probably all asleep by then. The surveillance guys don't know how or when Logan gets down there; they think he might be taking a bus or a taxi from the hospital where he's getting his therapy—there are a number of exits there and they lose him nearly every day. But he's usually already at the motel when she gets there about one in the morning. They go into the bar for a drink or two, then head for the room. After two or three hours in the sack, Ruth leaves and goes home so she can be back in before daylight. Logan just stays there the rest of the night."

Spear smiled one of his nasty little smiles. "Check it out," he said. "They met last night, they'll meet again tomorrow night. Hop on a commuter up to Carson City and see for yourself."

"I might do that," Nash said.

As Nash was leaving Spear's office, the claims director added, "Oh, Jack, if you go, don't put the trip on your expense account. You'll be doing this to satisfy your own curiosity. Far as I'm con-

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cerned, this case is closed and the claim is denied."

Spear was laughing quietly to himself as Nash closed the office door behind him.

In bed that night in Stella's modest little apartment, with her face nuzzled into his shoulder, Nash found himself chewing on the inside of his mouth, a habit he had when he was perplexed and troubled about something. Stella noticed him doing it.

"What's the matter, lover?" she asked lazily. "Didn't get enough?"

"I always get enough with you," Nash said. "No, it's just that I can't help thinking that Sam is stretching too far to make the Tenney claim a murder case."

"Why would he do that?" Stella asked. "I mean, dead's dead. Won't the company have to pay the death benefit anyway?"

"Not if we can prove by circumstantial evidence that the beneficiary on all three policies conspired with another employee of Eureka Petroleum to kill him. That would void everything. We don't even need a criminal conviction, either; we can claim fraud in a civil court. Remember how O. J. Simpson was found not guilty in a criminal case but guilty under the same facts in a civil case? Same principle applies here."

"You think Spear is wrong?"

"Something's wrong, I just don't know what. Maybe it's me."

"Hmmmm, I doubt that. You're usually very good at everything you do, in the office and out. Stop chewing the inside of your mouth."

They lay in silence for a few minutes, the light in the tiny little bedroom very low, not even a sheet covering them, Stella turned toward him with one long leg thrown over between his, one hand across his chest, fingers playing with the short hair around his ear.

"My rent got raised today," she said after a while.

"Really? How much?"

"Forty a month. I'm going to have to look for something cheaper."

Nash grunted quietly. "I doubt if you can *find* anything cheaper. What we probably need to do is move in together. Find something nicer for both of us."

"Even if we did," Stella reasoned, "it wouldn't be all *that* nicer. It's not like you earn big money either. What we probably should do is both find better jobs, with bigger companies that pay more."

"I'd hate to do that," Jack objected quietly. "I've put in a lot of years with California All-Risk. Sam keeps telling me I'm next in line for the claims director job. That would pay me about thirty thousand a year more. We'd be okay once I get that job."

"If you ever get it," Stella pointed out. "Spear is the type to keep dangling it in front of you for years."

Jack sighed quietly and they fell into silence again. Then presently he said, "I'll be gone again tomorrow night. Back over to

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Nevada on the Tenney claim."

Stella sighed also. "Well, if you're not going to be here, you'll have to give me a little something to tide me over."

She began to rub herself against his thigh and brought her playful fingers down from his ear.

Just before noon, two mornings later, Nash walked into Sam Spear's office with a report file in his hand. The claims director was getting his presentation together for a one o'clock meeting with the company's officers to make a decision on the Tenney claim.

"Well?" Spear asked. "Did you go up to Carson City?"

"Yes. Came back on the six o'clock commuter this morning."

"See the rendezvous at the Top Dollar Motel?"

"I saw it."

"Good, good." Spear chuckled as he organized his papers. "This will be the biggest feather in my cap yet, getting this claim denied. They'll probably hang an oil painting of me in the lobby after I retire."

"Just when do you think that might be, Sam? Your retirement?"

Spear feigned a cheerless expression. "If it was up to me, my boy, I'd pack it in right now, turn the job over to you. But after today, the company's officers probably wouldn't even consider letting me retire. Matter of fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they offered me a five-year employment contract, with a guaranteed salary increase every year. And more stock options, too. I think I've earned that." He paused and looked solemnly at Nash for a moment. "You know, my boy, the work I've done to get this Tenney claim denied is kind of like that fellow—what was his name, Noel?—who built the ark or whatever it was and saved mankind. I've saved this company, Jack. I'm kind of like, what do you call it, a saint."

"So you won't be retiring anytime soon, then?"

"Afraid not, Jack. It's just not in the cards right now. But don't worry, your time will come. One of these days."

Sure, Nash thought. One of these days.

"I'll see you later, Sam," he said.

"Right. I'll let you know how the meeting goes." Spear smiled widely and pointed to the report file in Nash's hand. "That for me?"

"No, not for you, Sam. See you later."

Shortly before two, a pale, stunned Sam Spear walked into Nash's office and dropped heavily into a chair.

"They—turned down my recommendation," he said in disbelief. "The directors—asked me to—to retire."

"I guess," Nash said quietly, "they didn't want the company to accuse two people of a murder that couldn't be proved."

"Couldn't be—proved? What do you mean?"

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"I mean Richard Tenney's not dead, Sam. He's not at the bottom of Ghost Lake. He was probably never even on the plane."

"What!"

"This was never a murder, Sam. It was a big shuffle, all right, but it was just a good, old-fashioned insurance-fraud scam. Tenney was in on it; as a matter of fact, he might even have planned it. One of the things I learned from talking to neighbors and coworkers was that he never liked his job. Snooping around for oil deposits didn't suit him. He dreamed about going to South America and exploring ancient archeological sites, visiting the ice shelves of Antarctica and looking at rocks that were millions of years old, searching for prehistoric bones in the Himalayas. For that kind of life, a person needs financial independence. The kind of financial independence you can get from two million dollars wisely invested."

"Two million?"

"Yeah, I figure Cliff Logan was in for half. After all, he took the major risk, crash landing on that lake and all. He put his life on the line so I imagine the four million was going to be cut down the middle."

"Where did you *get* all this information?" Spear demanded.

"I *investigated* the claim, Sam. I kept looking for new evidence. All you did was decide it was murder and focus on that." Nash tossed a report file across the desk. "It's all in there, Sam. When you were telling me about Ruth Tenney meeting Cliff Logan every other night at the Top Dollar Motel outside Carson City, you said something that piqued my curiosity. You said the surveillance team lost Logan every day when he went to the hospital in Reno for his therapy. Yet he supposedly got down to Carson City every other night to meet Ruth. So when I flew over there to satisfy my curiosity about their rendezvous, as you called it, I decided to also find out why the surveillance guys kept losing Logan. The reason, Sam, is that Logan didn't *leave* the hospital after his therapy sessions. He hung around and played gin rummy with some patients in the hospital recreation room every day. Stayed for the whole afternoon—until his girlfriend, a recently divorced blond nurse, got off shift for the day. Then he left with her, in her car. By then, of course, the surveillance crew had given up and gone home. Incidentally, the blond nurse is the married woman Logan took up with after Ruth dumped him for Dick Tenney. That's the reason he decided to undergo his therapy in Reno; so they could be together."

"Well, what difference does all that make?" Spear asked belligerently. "Maybe he's two-timing Ruth. The surveillance crew in Carson City reports that he was down there meeting her!"

Nash shook his head. "They're wrong, Sam. Ruth wasn't going down there to meet Cliff Logan. She was meeting her husband, Dick Tenney. I watched them last night. I can see why the surveil-

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lance people down there would mistake Tenney for Logan. Our geologist has a toupee of thick black hair just like Cliff's now, and last night he was wearing a leather jacket like the kind a lot of private pilots wear. He wasn't wearing glasses either, so maybe he's got contact lenses now. Whatever, it was an understandable misidentification, especially since the surveillance people didn't know what Dick Tenney looked like."

"But—how did *you* know?" Spear was aghast. "And how can you be sure? I mean, it was nighttime, dark out—"

"Think about it, Sam. Why was Logan going to the hospital for therapy?"

"Why, his knee was banged up in the emergency landing. So what?"

"So the guy Ruth was meeting at the motel didn't limp."

For a moment, Spear stared at Nash with his mouth agape. Then he reverted to his normal behavior and tried to intimidate and bluff. "That doesn't prove that the man down there is Tenney! It could be anybody!"

"No, it's Tenney. He and Ruth went into the all-night coffee shop for something to eat before she headed for home. While they were in there, I bribed the night desk clerk with fifty bucks—which I didn't put on my expense account, Sam—to let me into their room. I picked up the only two drinking glasses that had been used. Herman Golden had a friend of his in the sheriff's department lift fingerprints from them early this morning after I got back. The prints on one of the glasses match the prints on Richard Tenney's navy service record. It's him, Sam. He's alive."

An executive secretary stuck her head in the door. "Excuse me, Mr. Nash. The directors would like to see you in the boardroom."

"Be right there," Nash told her.

Dismayed, feeling like an accident victim, Sam Spear picked up the report file Nash had tossed across the desk to him. "You had this in my office before I went to the meeting." It was not a question, rather a dreadful realization.

"I had the original. That's a copy. The directors have the other one. If it's any consolation to you, Sam, the Tenney claim will still be denied. The big shuffle didn't work. The company won't have to take the four-million-dollar hit."

"To hell with the company," Spear said bitterly. "And to hell with you."

"Sorry you feel that way, Sam." Nash rose and went to the door. "No rush to vacate your office," he said on the way out. "I'll be taking a week off to get married and look for a new apartment. So long, Sam."

Nash walked down the hall toward the boardroom without looking back. ⊙

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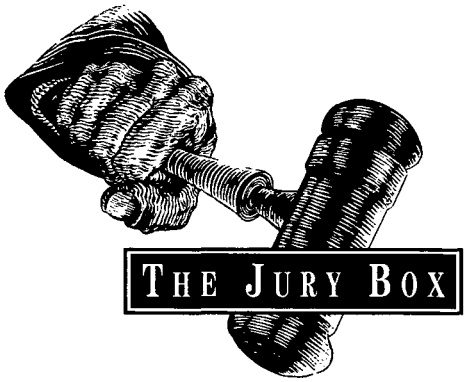

by Jon L. Breen

One dubious trend in detective series over the past couple of decades has been the provision of a large supporting cast of the sleuth's relatives, friends, and coworkers who recur from book to book whether their presence is demanded by the plot or not. Though I don't find this melding of detection and soap opera salutary in most cases, I can't deny that some writers, those who manage to follow the practice while sticking to the case at hand, avoid its pitfalls and use it to advantage. One such is Marcia Muller, whose latest two books present new wrinkles on San Francisco private eye Sharon McCone's large extended family.

*** Marcia Muller: *Listen to the Silence,* Mysterious, $23.95. Going through some old papers following her father's sudden death, Sharon discovers a secret about herself that sets her on the trail of her Shoshone heritage. Muller introduces a whole new group of McCone family and revisits many of the old ones, all in the context of a complex and enthralling plot concerning a battle of tribal activists and demon developers.

*** Marcia Muller: *McCone and Friends,* Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505; $16 trade paper, $40 limited hardcover. This collection gives some of Sharon's friends and coworkers a chance in the spotlight: while three of the eight stories are from her usual first-person viewpoint, two are narrated by investigator Rae Kelleher and one each by nephew Mick Savage, office manager Ted Smalley, and significant other Hy Ripinsky. Usually Sharon remains the master detective and her coworkers a varied and likeable group of Watsons.

**** Max Allan Collins: *The Hindenburg Murders,* Berkley, $6.50. Having made a sleuth of Jacques Futrelle in *The Titanic Murders* (1999), Collins now puts the creator of the Saint, Leslie Charteris, aboard the

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airship that exploded over Lakehurst, New Jersey, in 1937. There are differences between the two books—Charteris wasn't really on the Hindenburg's final journey; we know he must survive; and this time the disaster is an integral part of the story rather than an aftermath to the main action—but the author's devotion to historical accuracy and his uncanny ability to make real people into viable fictional characters, along with the strong sense of period mystery writing and plotting styles, are the same.

*** Val McDermid: *Booked for Murder,* Spinster's Ink, 32 E. First St., #330, Duluth, MN 55802; $12. A playfully misdirecting prologue, witty style, and an inventive murder method highlight this case for Lindsay Gordon, journalist-turned-academic, who returns from California to London to look into the death of a best-selling novelist whose unpublished final work foreshadows the manner of her death. To readers wary of the lesbian/feminist milieu: the qualities you may be worried about—hatred of men, political stridency, humorlessness—are not in evidence here. Nor, in my experience, are they in lesbian mysteries generally. This is the first U.S. edition of a novel published in Britain in 1996.

*** Peter Sellers: *Whistling Past the Graveyard,* Mosaic, $18.95 Canadian, $15 U.S. Fourteen stories by a skilled and versatile writer range from realistic crime to fantasy and horror. Especially notable are the whimsical "Advertising Hell," about the development of a selling campaign for a very warm travel destination; the satirical "Boogie Man," about the efforts to keep a rock performer's career alive; and the title story, a serial-killer tale that remind-ed me of Cornell Woolrich. (Sellers, one of the key figures in the Canadian mystery renais- sance of the 80s and 90s, is also the editor, with Robert J. Sawyer, of *Over the Edge: The Crime Writers of Canada Anthology* [Pottersfield Press, 83 Leslie Road, East Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia B2Z 1P8; $18.95 Canadian], which includes Sawyer's clever time-travel Sherlock Holmes pastiche "You See But You Do Not Observe" and stories by *EQMM* favorites James Powell, William Bankier, Edward D. Hoch, and Lawrence Block, the latter two American ringers.)

*** Ed McBain: *Driving Lessons,* Carroll & Graf, $12.95. In a solid example of McBain's procedural writing without the 87th Precinct, Detective Katie Logan looks into a vehicular death that occurs during a teenage girl's driving lesson. This 72-page novella is one of a series edited by Otto Penzler for the British publisher Orion, an admirable effort to preserve a now-rare length that is often perfect for a detective story.

** Aaron Elkins: *Skeleton Dance,* Morrow, $23. While it's

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good to run into old friends like Skeleton Detective Gideon Oliver and wife Julie, this French-based tale, concerning fraud and murder among researchers into fossils of early man, is too low-key and contrived to rank with their best adventures. On the plus side: the customary humor and details on the forensic examination of both old and new human remains, including a neat clue to the main secret. On the minus side: an elongated finishing explanation that borders on parody of classical detective fiction, and an excessive dose of culinary travelogue.

** Daniel Ferry: *Death on Delivery,* Writers Club Press, iuniverse.com, $12.95. This first novel, the first book to be reviewed here from an "on-demand" publisher, confronts ex-con John Bent, a police detective turned software programmer, with a series of murders of colleagues on a high-pressure project for NASA. Though the technical background assumes a computer savvy reader, you don't have to understand everything to become involved with the story and the characters. Ferry overdoes the piling on of detail, and the verbal confrontations with the baddies are clichéd, but he also writes some effective scenes, including a wild action climax, and overall offers a more satisfying product than some from more conventional publishing channels. I'd like to meet Bent again. (Coincidentally, there was another detective John Bent, who fronted a series of novels by H.C. Branson in the forties and fifties.)

** O'Neil De Noux: *Hollow Point/The Mystery of Rochelle Marais,* Gryphon Books, P.O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209; $12. Presented back-to-back in old Ace Double fashion and totaling about 75 pages, this trade-size paperback contains two New Orleans police stories with contemporary settings, previously unpublished, and a New Orleans historical recalling Poe's "Mystery of Marie Roget," previously published in *EQMM.* Though capable enough, they're not quite up to the standard of DeNoux's 1999 collection *LaStanza,* whose eponymous hero appears in one of these tales.

A basic reference work is newly available on CD-ROM. The second edition of *Walter Albert's Detective and Mystery Fiction: An International Bibliography of Secondary Sources* (Locus Press, P.O. Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661; $29.95) offers the ease and versatility of computer-aided searching but adds no new information: the cut-off date for entries remains 1990.

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The Extortionately Dear Departed

by David Williams

"They are the perfect couple for your . . . your very generous gift, Monsieur Talbot," said Pierre Boulanger, a thin, gaunt, stooping figure, thin-lipped, hesitant, and unctuous in his choice of words. He wore small, steel-rimmed spectacles with round lenses and walked always with straight arms held close to his sides. Never given to true familiarity with either of us, he was invariably deferential toward me, and somewhat nervous when my wife Helen was about. I kidded her that he probably lusted after her in spirit.

But, in the end, I was wrong, even about that.

Over the past few years David Williams has been concentrating on a police series featuring the Welsh Inspector Parry. *Suicide Intended* (Harper Collins), the fifth and most recent Parry adventure, sold out in hardcover in both the U.S. and the U.K. The paperback, released in late 1999, is still available. Critic William F. Deeck calls the book, "A fine, civilized and fair-play police procedural." Whatever this author writes, we can depend on its being finely wrought. †

To describe the scam we planned to pull as "generous" was typical Boulanger euphemism. From the start, three months before this, he had chosen never to refer to the illegal side of it, nor even to admit that it owned one. True, we had encouraged him in this, but we had never expected to recruit a collaborator who would enter into the spirit of things with the righteous enthusiasm of a parish priest engaged in unimpeachable good works.

Aged forty-five—three years older than me—Boulanger was a minor official in the regional health office of the French Social Security Ministry, and lived with his widowed mother in a Bordeaux suburb. We had met him when Helen was reclaiming the cost of having had her appendix removed at the local hospital.

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Because we were both British citizens resident in France, there had been extra formalities to go through.

Boulanger had volunteered to come to the château after Helen had explained on the telephone that since we were in the middle of the grape harvest, and she was still in a delicate state, it would be impossible for either of us to get into town easily for several weeks.

In fact, after speaking with him for a few minutes, my perceptive wife had concluded that he could be the helpmate we had been seeking unsuccessfully for months. His whole manner had exuded selfless, eager cooperation. In the matter of the payment for the appendectomy, he had seemed to be almost ready to waive the formalities and approve it on the phone. But Helen, still following her hunch, had cunningly protested that we couldn't possibly allow him to do anything irregular or risky, and certainly not before he had even met us. He had replied that while the risk was immaterial, it would be a privilege to make our acquaintance.

He had arrived that first time in the most dilapidated little Citroen Dyane (the rattlebones model with the canvas roof) that I had ever encountered still capable of movement under its own power. The comedy was that he drove the machine as if he was competing in the Monaco Grand Prix—at all of thirty miles an hour maximum, and that only when he was travelling downhill with a following wind. It was droll to watch the car crawling up our curved drive, the driver's hands, arms, and shoulders, usually so inert, wrestling as if he was desperately trying to control the wheel before he brought the vehicle to a terminal sort of halt somewhat short of the front door. You felt the wheels might at least have thrown up a showering of loose gravel, but they didn't.

Boulanger had been dressed that day—as he was on most subsequent days—in a worn, fawn cotton jacket, equally shabby but well-creased grey trousers, and a black beret. He had pulled off the beret courteously but with great economy of movement—head inclined to allow the minimum upward and downward action of his right hand and arm—the exercise exposing a glistening, prematurely-bald head.

To be honest, Boulanger's car just about compared with our château in the elegance stakes. The place was an unlovely, broken-down farmhouse with three acres of not very fruitful vines, all on the wrong side of the hill, in any case, for the ripening of perfect grapes. We had bought it three years before, in a moment of abandon, because it was cheap, and seemed to us to be overflowing with romantic potential. We had tired of our humdrum London jobs—mine at a bank, Helen's at a bookstore—as well as our even more humdrum existence in commuter land. Confidently, we had opted to exchange all that for a healthy, French rural life, supported by the income our ownership of an honest brand of

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paysant cru wine would surely generate. The trouble was, it was only the peasants who benefited when we failed to sell the stuff to anyone in the higher echelons of society. Worse, selling the château itself was proving even more difficult than flogging the wine: We'd been trying since year two.

The only possible upside to what had become our penurious state was one that offered financial succour for Helen alone. When we had sold our unpretentious London suburban house for a handsome profit (there had been an English property boom on at the time), Helen had insisted that we insure my life for two million pounds for five years—until we were well established in the new life. She didn't care for the prospect that if anything happened to me in the interim, she would be left with a wine-producing business to run single-handed, while, by then, possibly encumbered with young children, in a foreign clime. Her own father had been killed in an accident when she was fourteen, and her mother had struggled to keep his business and the family afloat before expiring a few years later herself—Helen believed from exhaustion.

We had paid the whole five-year life insurance premium in advance, to qualify for a fabulously low rate. Even so, there was nothing fabulous in the fact that I had to expire before there could be any benefit.

"Have you ever thought that we could fake your death?" Helen had ruminated in bed one night. We were in the middle of our third abysmal grape-picking season.

"You mean, have me fail to return from a sailing trip? Or have my clothes found abandoned on a lonely beach? They wouldn't pay out for years in case I turned up again. And if they figured it was suicide, they wouldn't pay at all," I countered firmly. I'd checked the policy frequently with vaguely the same sort of idea in mind.

"No, I mean really die. Not you, of course, my sweet. Someone else who we'd pretend was you."

"You're not suggesting murder?" My wife is a lovely, butter-wouldn't-melt-in-the-mouth, English-rose innocent. Six years younger than me, she had been piously educated at an expensive Catholic school, at least until the family fortune gave out. The very notion of murderous . . .

"Of course not," she responded primly. "But there must be tragic cases of middle-aged Frenchmen dying of incurable conditions, with distraught wives worried like hell over what to live on when they're left alone. I know I would be." She was good at entering into the spirit of her fantasies. "Nobody gets much of a pension before they're past sixty, and the French state widow's pension is lousy anyway. We simply need to find an impoverished, terminally ill patient who looks vaguely like you, so you can . . . can swop places," she embellished, warming to the task.

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"And swop wives too?" I questioned.

"Of course. But that bit's only pretend." She frowned, as if I'd spoiled her train of thought with such a trivial point, then added, "We promise the couple, say, ten per cent of what we'd get from the insurance company—"

"You mean, two hundred thousand pounds?" I interrupted.

"Yes. That's more than three hundred thousand U. S. dollars, leaving us with . . . nearly three million dollars," she calculated wistfully, as if we had the money already. She was thinking in dollars because we'd originally planned to emigrate to Oregon. That was before we'd both been seduced by the French château. "The husband would have to come away with me somewhere, pretending to be you," she continued, "before he . . . he passes on. When he does, I identify the body as yours, and we quietly pay his share to his wife, or whatever." She paused, then completed with a rare spurt of genuine commercial practicality. "Perhaps it would need to be a down payment of a hundred thousand pounds, and the rest on death."

"So how would we raise the first hundred thousand pounds, ahead of my untimely demise?" I questioned with feeling.

"We could sell the château for a really knockdown price. We wouldn't need it anymore."

She was right there. The place would probably fetch more than that, even in a distress sale. "And what about the 'wife or whatever'?" I went on doubtfully. "How does she explain what's happened to a previously ailing patient when what she ends up with is lusty me?"

"As I said, the couple would need to leave where they've been living and come away to a place where none of us is known. The wife would want to be with her real husband in any case. To look after him till the end. And she wouldn't go back to wherever it was they lived before, that's until after his death, and after the divorce. Then it would be all right."

"What divorce?"

"Well, she'd need to divorce you eventually, so you could marry me again. That's after you'd officially enjoyed a miraculous cure. She'd be left with all the money we'd given her. A middle-aged widow with capital shouldn't find it hard to attract a new man. I feel she'd want to marry again, too," mused my romantic wife. "The divorce would be uncomplicated. We'd get it someplace where it's easy."

"America," I provided, just to add colour to the crazy scenario.

"Yes, perfect. I expect that's where we'll end up in any case."

"You mean because I wouldn't always be running into old friends and colleagues there? People who'd read in the paper I was dead."

"Mm, partly. But I think you'd probably have to grow a beard, too."

"Only if you will as well, darling, to complete our disguise."

She giggled, then sighed. "You know, the whole thing would be a

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true act of mercy. And we'd still be left with all that money, plus whatever remained of what we get for the château. We'd make a fresh start. Something in the country still. Not a vineyard, but with clean air for rearing the children."

We'd put off having a family till things got better. "What if the couple have kids?" I asked.

"If they do, we'll have to deal with that when the time comes. You're being negative, darling," Helen remonstrated.

"Because the whole thing's pie in the sky," I countered. "We'll never find the luckless patient. And if we do, the idea's still too complicated."

Except it was exactly three months later when Pierre Boulanger found what he had termed the "perfect couple" for our generosity—and it was hardly complicated at all.

Boulanger spent most of his normal working day visiting hospitals and the homes of invalids—which is what Helen had discovered during that first telephone conversation. When she was sure we knew him well enough to risk it, she outlined our plan, emphasising its deeply humanitarian aspect. She never mentioned the two million pounds, only the amount of the insurance money we were ready to give to some terminally ill patient and his wife if a swop could be engineered.

Our new acquaintance seemed so moved by our generosity that we seriously thought he would burst into tears. Later, he firmly rejected our offer of a finder's fee for himself. "It's for the good of all," he pronounced portentously. This had been during his third visit to the château in as many days. We had let him recruit himself as an honorary grape picker who stayed each evening to share our simple supper, and which led to his becoming our equally honorary scout for the patient we needed. And who better for the job, it quickly proved, than resourceful Pierre?

Henri and Michelle Rabut were a sad couple. She was forty-seven years old, still very comely, and working at the checkout in a supermarket in St-Jean, a small town close to Limoges. Or that was what she had been doing until her slightly older, farm-labourer husband had been told by the doctors that he had a wasting blood condition for which there was no known cure. He had, at the most, six months to live. Boulanger first met them two months after this when they had applied for extra government assistance. St-Jean was a hundred and fifty miles northeast of Bordeaux, well outside his normal territory, but he had been temporarily seconded there due to illness in the Limoges office. By this time, Michelle Rabut had already quit her job to look after Henri at home—she wouldn't countenance his spending more time than necessary in a hospital.

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Like his wife, Henri Rabut came of simple country stock and was endowed with a heap of innate peasant common sense. He was fatalistic about his condition—a realist resigned to his fate and concerned only to provide for his wife in her widowhood. The couple were childless like us, but, in their case, due to Henri's impotence. His blood condition had first been revealed during tests at a fertility clinic.

Miraculously, it was clear from our first meeting that Henri could be accepted as my slightly older brother. If it came to a border official's cursory glance at a passport photograph, we all believed there was no doubt he could be taken for me. The prospect of the two-hundred-thousand-pound bounty (about two million French francs) had been explained to Henri by Boulanger, and it was a credit to our conscientious go-between that both Henri and his wife considered us heaven-sent and inspired benefactors.

It had been my idea that Helen and the Rabuts should move to England for the remainder of Henri's life—with me nearby, but in the background. It was bound to be less complicated and quicker if the insurance claim on my life was made in my native country. It would also be wiser, I thought, if no one in the community where the threesome settled had sight of me. In public, Michelle and I would have looked a touch less convincing as a couple than Helen and Henri, a point that might have prompted suspicion or at least nosy enquiry if the four of us had been living together. Better, I thought, to keep things simple, with Michelle posing as the friend and helper to Helen and her sick "husband."

Henri, although by now seriously debilitated, could still cope with the journey across the Channel with the help of a wheelchair. He didn't own a passport, so the plan made a useful opportunity for him to acquire one. The photograph used in it was of me, with my eyelids drooped a little, my hair cut short like Henri's, and my cheeks sucked in to emulate his. We took it as a good omen that the photo fooled the local priest in St-Jean, who signed it on the back as a true likeness of Henri before it went to the passport office. This encouraged us to have Henri travel as me on my passport, and for me to travel by separate route as Henri: That worked too.

As predicted, we had disposed of the château within a week of it being put up for sale, and the money came through much more quickly than expected. This was because the asking price had been so low that the buyer was scared we might change our minds. In fact, we got far less than we had paid originally for the place, but it was sufficient to provide the Rabuts with their down payment, with enough left over to cover our expenses before poor Henri passed on.

Since it was now midwinter, it was easy for Helen to rent a seaside cottage at short notice in a thinly populated part of Devon-

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shire, within reasonable reach of a doctor and a town with a hospital, in case such a facility proved necessary. Once the three of them had settled in, she put it out at the village post-office-cum-store that she, her gravely sick husband Edward, and their indispensable friend and housekeeper Michelle, were there because, despite having lived in France for several years, Edward wanted to see out his last days in the area where he had spent a good deal of his childhood. In fact, the true Edward Talbot had never been to Devon in his life, so that the possibility of anyone local recognising my name but not Henri's face and build as quite matching it was remote. Helen also told the chatty postmistress that Michelle's husband was not with them because it would have meant giving up his job in France—an unnecessary sacrifice when it was known that Edward had so little time to live. We had a stroke of luck in the village doctor. His name was Jacques Egbert, and he was a Frenchman who had settled in Devon after marrying a local girl in the mid 1980s. What brief conversations he had with Henri (whom he knew as Edward Talbot) he was delighted to conduct in French, to the great relief of his patient. My surname happens to be as common in France as it is in England, and Helen had explained to the doctor that her husband had been brought up to speak the other language fluently by French grandparents—which, in my case, was not far from the truth.

Jacques Egbert was a competent doctor who kept his searching enquiries at the medical not the social level. Helen insisted on retaining him privately and not as a National Health Service physician. She explained that she and Michelle were determined to nurse Edward at home for as long as it was possible, which could involve an excessive number of house calls. The house calls didn't bother Egbert at all, while the private arrangement pleased him a great deal: He had very few fee-paying patients.

On his first visit to the cottage, Egbert took blood samples from Henri for analysis. These confirmed the patient's condition, also the advanced stage it had reached. The doctor was relieved that the two women were well aware that there was no cure for what ailed Henri, only pills and injections to make his life more bearable. Helen played the part of the shortly-to-be-widowed spouse with great conviction, something made easier by the fact that, in the circumstances, Michelle herself showed almost superhuman stoicism.

The burden of frequent house visits did not, after all, come to test the doctor. Henri died of heart failure one night in his sleep, five weeks after he had arrived in England. This poignant event, predicted but deeply sorrowful, in the end came as a relief for Henri as well as for the rest of us. Helen, in particular, had grown immensely fond of him, and the feeling had been mutual. The funeral was a quiet one, attended only by Helen, Michelle, the

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doctor, and his wife. The body was cremated. Helen kept me informed by telephone at the small Ashley Hotel where I was currently staying, in the inland town of Boddlestone. As a general precaution, I had been changing locations and hotels a good deal since our arrival. I had moved to this one just before the cremation. I missed the service. Apart from the reason that had kept me away to date, I had persuaded myself it wouldn't have been fitting for me to be present, since I was shortly to make off with the deceased's wife. Also, to be honest, I didn't fancy attending my own funeral. After a copy of the registered death certificate had been received by the insurance company, they sent a representative named Plumridge to call on Helen by appointment. She described him as a quiet person with the demeanour of a senior clergyman. He also called on Dr. Egbert, but this, he explained with a touch of embarrassment, was normal practice, the sum insured being relatively large. Indeed, he went out of his way to assure Helen that his company had no reservations about the nature of her husband's sad and untimely demise. It had certainly been untimely for the company.

Before the policy had been issued, nearly four years before, I had been subjected to an extensive medical examination. There had been no suspicion of a rare and terminal blood condition then. Plumridge had earnestly observed as much to Helen, something he combined with his renewed condolences, and the information that the two million pounds would be paid in seven days—which it was.

Shortly after this, Helen had arranged for the second hundred thousand pounds to be transferred electronically to Michelle's new bank account in Lyons, which Henri's true widow had set up under Boulanger's instructions. He had stressed that it would be less noticeable for her to be with a branch of a large bank in a regional French capital.

It was the day before the money was due to be transferred that Pierre Boulanger turned up at Boddlestone. I had discreetly kept in touch with him during our time in England, so he knew where I was staying, as well as about the progress on the insurance payout. We were relying on him to guide Michelle on how to look after her money, as he had done with the first installment when her husband had been alive—and very competently, according to both of them, particularly Michelle. He was hardly a professional "money man," but was proving a prudent, honest, down-to-earth advisor, which is what Michelle testified he had been to them from the start. He had told us, in his modest way, that he handled his mother's financial affairs in the same practical fashion.

It was good to know that Boulanger stood so high in Michelle's esteem, particularly as she had no near relation or friend in business

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to turn to otherwise. I certainly didn't wish to become too closely involved in her affairs, since she would shortly be divorcing me.

I hadn't expected Boulanger to come over from France unannounced. Unfortunately, I had been out when he had telephoned from Dover at nine o'clock in the morning and left a message with Shirley, the Ashley Hotel's not very bright but curvaceous and leggy receptionist. He had come by car, a new one, he had said, and he estimated he'd be in Boddlestone by one o'clock for lunch.

"Must be a really fast car," Shirley offered in an awe-struck way—fast cars probably equating with rich and equally fast owners in her estimation.

"It won't be," I answered, unconvinced that the thrifty, minor civil servant had treated himself to something capable of covering the distance in the time.

In fact, Boulanger arrived at twelve-thirty in a new beret and a not quite so new, but dashing, open white Porsche, looking flushed and shyly pleased with himself. It went through my mind that the car, though two or three years old, must have cost him a lot more than I would have expected him to spend on a replacement for the Citroen. But then, to my knowledge, he had never overindulged himself before. It occurred to me, also, that I might offer to pay for the car as a present, in lieu of the finder's fee he had rejected. Indeed, it seemed possible that he now regretted this piece of self-denial, was too meek to say so, but had come in the new car naively hoping I'd take the hint and offer to defray the cost.

By keeping watch for my visitor through the lounge window, I had managed to stop him as he'd been about to climb the hotel steps. It was the kind of establishment where conversations were easily overheard. "Let's have a late lunch along the coast. It'll give me a chance to ride in your splendid new motor," I suggested firmly and loudly after we'd shaken hands. "There was really no need for you to come over, you know." I added, once we were out of earshot of the building. "And really it would have been wiser if we hadn't been seen together in public." I had sandwiches and some beer in a bag under my arm for our lunch. "Terrific car," I added as we got into the Porsche, and to soften the effect of my admonition. "How much did it cost you, Pierre?" I watched to see if the enquiry would please him as much as I'd surmised it would. But he completely ignored it.

"We have important matters to discuss," he responded solemnly. "Am I right in believing you originally proposed paying Michelle and her husband five percent of the insurance money, monsieur?" He was still addressing me in his formal way, despite the number of times I had pressed him to call me Edward.

Helen and I had never divulged to Boulanger what the total insurance payout would be. "No, we'd always committed a much

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larger percentage than that," I answered, as it happened, quite accurately. Nor did his reference to what had been "originally proposed" register with me when he said it: We had only ever put up one proposal to him. "But, with great respect, Pierre, I don't think the actual percentage is any of your business," I ended.

At this point I was directing Boulanger to head the car out of town onto the coast road. He was driving with the ferocity that was so wildly out of keeping with the rest of his persona—and which made him a good deal more menacing to other road users than when he had been at the wheel of a clapped-out jalopy. I had already needed to remind him several times that in Britain we drive on the left-hand side of the road, not the right. It surprised me that he had reached Boddlestone unscathed.

"Ah, but in the matter of the percentage you are mistaken, monsieur. It is very much my business. Mine and Michelle's. I am here to tell you we now require the whole of the insurance payment you have received, less two hundred thousand pounds," he completed.

As if to underline this aggressive and preposterous demand with a matching bellicose action, he gunned the accelerator, forcing the Porsche around an electric milk float whose astonished driver had been easing it out to the centre of the road prior to making a turn. We were still in a built-up area. After completing the foolhardy manoeuvre, my companion frowned intensely, but not at the milkman whose arm-waving protest he had totally ignored.

"What do you mean? It's Michelle who gets the two hundred thousand," I expostulated. "And she's had half of it already, as you well know." I was now very uneasy—and with good reason.

"But that was only the . . . the provisional arrangement, monsieur." We had left the town now, and he had begun racing along at over eighty until I shouted at him that we'd have the police on our tail if he didn't observe the speed limit. "Michelle has run the greatest risk in all this," he went on, easing back a little on the pedal. "She deserves the, how do you say, the lion's share. I believe you and madame have received four million pounds."

"Nonsense, it was only half that," I exclaimed without thinking, consumed by a mixture of anger and outrage, but then immediately regretting the disclosure.

"So it was two million, monsieur." He seemed to have accepted this as fact. "It wasn't very generous of you to offer Michelle only ten percent. So it's justice that we match you. You must pay Michelle one million, seven hundred thousand. That's the total, minus ten percent and the hundred thousand you have already advanced to Michelle. We shall be scrupulously fair in keeping to the revised agreement. Only we need Madame Talbot to transfer what we are owed to Michelle's bank in Lyons by this time tomorrow."

"Drop dead, Pierre," I answered, nearly speechless with fury.

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"It would not be in your interests if I dropped dead, monsieur . . ." he began, as I thought, arrogantly to imply that we were still dependent on his involvement for the pittance being offered.

"And what's all this 'we' business when you speak about you and Michelle?" I broke in before he had finished his sentence. "I don't believe she's ready to renege on our original deal."

Boulanger laughed aloud at this; well, not all that loudly, but he seldom made any noise at all when he showed amusement. "Michelle and I had been in love with each other for several months before I met you and your wife, monsieur."

"You mean she was unfaithful to Henri? I don't believe it."

"I never said she was unfaithful to him. Only that we were in love. We planned to marry after his death. But then, with my sick mother still alive and needing to go into a private nursing home soon, it was a question of finding enough money for everything. Your . . . your gift was providential."

"And generous enough as first agreed. So why are you now being so damned greedy? It won't work, you know," I pressed, but aware already that we were his hostages.

It was clear now that we had played into Boulanger's hands by exposing our scam to him in the first place. It must have offered the perfect fulfillment to his wildest dream. And if he shopped us to the insurance company, it was Helen and I who'd go to gaol, not him. He was clean, and we'd never be able to prove differently.

"We are all greedy, monsieur," he replied in the tone of a sage philosopher.

"But Michelle—" He seemed to have forgotten her—and her complicity.

"Is greedier than anyone," he broke in primly, as if he regretted her weakness.

"But she's involved in the insurance fraud, too."

He outwardly winced at the word fraud, the hypocrite, before he responded. "Only because you took advantage of her simplicity, monsieur, and the plight of her poor sick husband, now dead. Any court, in England or France, would sympathise with her position. Especially if she confessed to everything and appeared as a witness for the prosecution."

So he had it all figured. "Except, if you shop me and my wife, you'll lose the money. All of it. The lot." I said, increasingly convinced that he wasn't really expecting to get ninety percent of it, that his demand was just an opening gambit. He had to be ready to negotiate. The question was, should I play ball with him, or simply call his bluff? "If I shop you, monsieur, you'll go to prison," he uttered flatly, but, as I knew, accurately.

"Nonsense. We'd just be fined and made to give the money back." Only I wished I could believe my own words. "Tell you

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what, Pierre," I continued, "disappointed as I am in you, and my wife will be more so, I'm ready to offer you another . . . hundred thousand pounds. But that's absolutely as far as I'll go. So you can take it or leave it. It's that or nothing. And remember, if you report us to the authorities, and even if Michelle does witness against us, she'll even have to give back the money she's already got from us." I was not absolutely sure of my ground on that either. Since the first hundred thousand had been paid before we had the insurance payout, it was technically nothing to do with the scam. Even so, it seemed a telling threat.

Boulanger shrugged his shoulders prior, possibly, to challenging the supposition. Except that was the very moment when he'd suddenly had to brake the car hard. He had been travelling too fast again on the approach to a traffic roundabout, and the braking counted for nothing in view of what he did next. Briefly disorientated, he'd followed habit and swung the car right, instead of left. The road had seemed empty, but not once we were driving on it in the wrong direction.

The driver of the articulated truck did his best, but he still hit us broadside. Boulanger was killed outright.

I was still in hospital at the end of two weeks, but mending fast by then. My injuries had been multiple, but not permanent or disabling. I had also been fully conscious when they pulled me from the wreckage, and capable soon afterwards of concocting a story explaining who I was and why I was in England. I identified myself as Henri Rabut, and explained that I had come over from France to collect my wife, Michelle, who was staying in a rented cottage close to Boddlestone with her friend, Mrs. Helen Talbot, whose husband they had both been nursing up to the time of his recent death. Since Mrs. Talbot had not been in any state to be left alone so soon after her bereavement, and since the cottage was small and I hadn't wished to intrude on a widow's grief, I had been staying at a local hotel. About my presence in Boulanger's car, I said he was an old friend on holiday in England and that we had arranged to lunch together.

Of course, it had been urgently necessary to deal with Michelle. In the new circumstances, I didn't believe she would have the nerve to persist with Boulanger's blackmail plan on her own, but I had to be sure. Happily, I was right. I confronted her with his admitted perfidy as soon as she and Helen came to the hospital. Helen was profoundly shocked, and Michelle broke down in tears of shame and embarrassment—which to outside observers passed for tears of joy at her "husband's" survival. Even so, it was as well for our general credibility that this scene took place in a small four-bedded hospital ward, in which I was the only patient that

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day. Michelle showed surprisingly little grief over Boulanger's death. It seemed that there had not been much true affection between them—he had simply been using her as he had used us. She more or less threw herself on our mercy, saying that he'd forced her to go along with his disloyal plan against her will. Then she begged us still to give her the second hundred thousand and to let her go back to her birthplace near Lyons. It was significant that, according to her, Boulanger had only declared his love for her, and proposed marriage, the week *after* he had engineered the Rabuts' involvement in the insurance scam.

The unhappy woman now planned to buy a farm to work with her brother and his family. She volunteered that she would still cooperate willingly over the divorce, putting proceedings in hand in France immediately. We had already discovered that a "quickee" divorce was as simple there as it was in England or America. Since, by this time, the money we had agreed to pay Michelle would be in her bank account next day, the simplest and smartest thing to do was to pack her off to France straightaway. Indeed, for her to go back by herself, leaving her putative husband-to-be cared for by another woman, would provide useful grounds for the divorce.

So poor misguided Boulanger got his deserts, and a happy ending seemed to be in store for the rest of us.

It was at the end of my third week in hospital that the police came to see me again. At first I assumed the visit was to clarify points in my first statement about the accident, until I realised that these were a different type of police—plainclothes officers, not uniformed, three of them in all, and one of them French. Helen was with them, looking miserable.

My mistake had been in interrupting Boulanger in the car when he was saying it would not be in my interests if he dropped dead—which, of course, is exactly what the wretched man did a split second later. He had pretty certainly been about to inform me that he'd left a letter with a Bordeaux lawyer to be handed to the police if he died suddenly in suspicious circumstances—showing that he trusted me a good deal less than I had always trusted him.

It had been ten days before the lawyer, hearing of Boulanger's demise, and the manner of it, had decided to take what, on lawyerly consideration, seemed to him the proper action. After that, things had moved fast, with the French and British police and the insurance company working in friendly cooperation.

I was right about one thing. After getting all their money back, the British insurance company decided not to press charges. They didn't want the case advertised because it would have made them look stupid or careless, or both. After investigation, the police also dropped the idea that I could somehow have been responsible for

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taking Boulanger's life—which I clearly couldn't have been, not without putting my own life in equal danger. Even so, the Crown Prosecutor put me on trial for impersonating a dead person, with criminal intent. Helen and Michelle were charged with complicity.

The hearing took place in England. Michelle was acquitted because her lawyer claimed she had been a grieving widow callously led astray. She'd had to return the second hundred thousand pounds to the insurance company, of course, but she had kept the first one, and there was no legal way of making her give that back to us. We'd hoped she might have shared it with us at least, but it had already been invested in that family farm, or her brother swore it had been, and he was a hard and unsympathetic man who overruled her as easily as Boulanger had done.

Helen was convicted and fined £20,000—which cleared us out. She has returned to her old bookshop job in London, and glad of the chance.

The judge gave me eighteen months. Thanks to good behaviour, I shall be released next week after serving only half the term.

Except for what Helen brings in, we're penniless. This is why I hope your production company will consider making a film of our true story, which has yet to be told publicly in the detail I have set down in this letter.

I anxiously look forward to hearing from you. ●

A TRIBUTE TO JON L. BREEN

On May 6th, 2000, at the Malice Domestic Mystery Convention in Washington, D.C., your editor had the honor of accepting for Jon L. Breen the 3rd annual Ellen Nehr Award for Excellence in Mystery Reviewing. Named for one of the genre's most incisive critics, the Ellen Nehr Award was instituted by the American Crime Writers League to fill a gap in our field's many categories of awards. At conventions throughout the year the achievements of writers of fiction, movie and television scripts, true crime, and biographies are celebrated—seldom those of the critic or book reviewer.

There can be no question that Jon L. Breen deserves special recognition. Unfailingly, from January of 1977 to October of 1983, and again from November of 1988 to the present, he has delivered to *EQMM* informative reviews, often under a specific theme, in which he manages to entertain and enlighten as well as to pass judgment.

Jon Breen was preceded at *EQMM* by four other reviewers, all distinguished men of letters considered to be authorities on mystery fiction: Howard Haycraft, Anthony Boucher, Robert P. Mills, and John Dickson Carr. It was John Dickson Carr who first reviewed for us under the heading "The Jury Box," and during the five years, from 1983-1988, when Mr. Breen took time off to write his own award-winning fiction, Allen J. Hubin also put his byline to the column. Still, no one can match Jon Breen's record of service: eighteen years of superior columns! *EQMM* salutes you, Jon, and offers deepest thanks for your help in making our magazine a leader in the field.

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Art by Allen Davis

THE BONES

by Peter Turnbull

Again the man saw the bones. Again he thought nothing of them. Just bones, bones in the heather. He had got used to seeing bones up here. Bones picked clean by scavengers and microorganisms. Up here on Fenwick Moor there were many bones. The moor was Keith Stoddart's favourite place. Up here, alone, him and his thoughts. He liked it. He lived alone. Didn't even keep a dog. Keith Stoddart was the gamekeeper for the Apsleys at Cliff Grange House. Part of the land owned by the Apsleys included a generous section of Fenwick Moor. The moor was used for grouse shooting. Large companies purchased shooting rights for a few weeks to entertain clients and potential customers. It meant good money for the Apsleys but only if there were grouse to shoot. In May, the grouse nest and lay eggs. In the May time of the year the stoats attack the grouse nests and suck the eggs. In May, Keith Stoddart goes up to "the tops" and sets and baits grouse snares. It was as he was doing that that he saw the bones. Again.

A rib cage gleaming in the strong sunlight. It was not that he approached them, rather it was that the imaginary line along

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which he chose to place the snares ran close to the bones. As he drew closer, he saw with detached interest that the bones were human. A full skeleton, complete with grinning skull. He walked on, carefully placing the snares. He had a job to do.

At the close of the day, when all the snares he needed to set had been set, he walked off the tops to his isolated cottage and prepared himself a meal: a simple stew. He ate it, savouring the food. He had, of late, come to enjoy cooking and eating what he had prepared. Then, as evening melted into night, he walked to the hotel. At the hotel he picked up the pay phone in the foyer and dialled the police.

True police procedurals—stories that follow a cohort of police officers through the day-to-day duties of their department—are more common at novel than short story length. The reason is clear: It takes a lot of juggling to fit the stories of the several officers into the overriding crime plot. No one does it more skillfully in the short form than Peter Turnbull. ¶

"Found some bones," he said.

"Bones? Human?"

"Aye. Thought they were sheep bones at first."

"Where?"

"On the tops."

"Where?"

"On the tops. Fenwick Moor."

"That's a big place."

"Aye. Big enough."

"We'll need more information."

"I'll take you."

"When?"

"Sunday."

"It's still only Monday."

"Aye."

"Who am I speaking to?"

"Tell you on Sunday."

"We'll need to see those bones as soon as . . ."

"Why? They're not going anywhere and no one's going near them. They're on private land. The only person up there this time of year is me."

"Who are you?"

"You'll find out."

"You could be charged with wasting police time."

"Sunday. No sooner. No later. That's my day off. I'm not losing time for anybody and not for a skeleton that's been there for years anyway."

"I can only repeat the warning."

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"The white house."

"The what?"

"On the Kilmarnock/Glasgow Road. As you're coming south from Glasgow there's a white house about halfway between Glasgow and Kilmarnock. Send some men. Turn left at the white house. It's the road to Cliff Grange. I'll be standing in the road from ten A.M., Sunday. I'll wait until ten-thirty A.M., then I'll be away and I won't be coming back." Stoddart replaced the phone just lightly enough not to be accused of slamming it down and walked into the bar with piped music and tartan-patterned carpet. He liked a beer at the close of the day.

Stoddart saw the police car the instant that Sergeant Piper and PC Hamilton saw him. From his point of view, the car was a small white vehicle which seemed to prowl along the lane. From the point of view of the occupants of the car, he was a solitary figure, massively built, standing in the centre of the road.

"Not the sort of guy I'd like to meet on a dark night." Piper slowed the car and halted in front of the man.

"Imagine him with a sawn-off in his hands." Hamilton got out of the car. As did Piper.

"You've come, then?" Stoddart's eyes were hard, his jaw set firm.

"You're the gentleman who phoned us?"

"Aye."

"We do not appreciate being kept waiting. A corpse is a serious matter."

"It's not a corpse. It's a skeleton. Anyway, that's your lookout."

"Who are you?"

"Stoddart. I'm the gamekeeper for Cliff Grange House."

Piper paused. "So where is it?"

Without speaking, Stoddart turned and walked off the road and put himself at the slope of the moor as it rose up from the road to the tops. The cops were suddenly aware that they were expected to follow. They did so, but not without a struggle. Stoddart was a man in his middle years but was also a man of immense physical strength. Clearly so, given the short work he made of the slope.

"He makes it look like a Sunday morning stroll to the news agent's." Piper clutched at a strand of heather and hauled himself a few feet further up the slope. His shirt was saturated with sweat. Behind him, Hamilton murmured something about them going back and fetching one of the police Landrovers. Eventually they stood beside Stoddart, who showed no sign of his exertions.

"Yon tree." Stoddart pointed across the blue-grey-black, flat, gently undulating landscape.

"What tree?" Piper panted, scanning the landscape.

"Yon tree." Stoddart nodded to the area ahead of him, still point-

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ing. Then Piper saw a small tree of limited growth in the middle distance. "I see it."

"Walk towards it. You'll come across the bones near the tree, about three hundred yards short of it." He turned and walked down the slope.

Piper and Hamilton watched Stoddart go. "Day off." Piper smiled. They then turned and looked at the moor. "It's a fine day for it, anyway. Some folk do this for a pastime and you and me get to be paid for it. Come on."

They found the bones just where Stoddart had said they would find them. The skeleton was on its back. The skull grinned at them.

"Well, he was right, in a sense," Piper said, "six days wouldn't have made a deal of difference in this case. Even if it is murder."

It was, in the event, a very, very clear case of murder.

"A very clear case of murder." Dr. Reynolds reclined in his chair. He consulted his notes as he spoke on the phone. "Either that or someone caved in the skull of an already deceased person, but I doubt it. It's the sort of injury you get if you put a pickaxe handle over someone's head."

"A pickaxe handle." Donoghue scribbled on his notepad whilst holding the phone to his ear with his shoulder.

"Or similar." Reynolds reached for his notes. "You see, it's a linear fracture, many years old; we can tell that by the faded colour of the splintered pieces, and it's that which makes me think that this is not a case of someone happening upon a skull and fracturing it out of devilment. The other thing that makes me think that this injury is the cause of death is the angle—it's square on the back of the head, at the very back of the skull. The deceased would have been standing when he was struck from behind."

"It's a male?"

"Oh yes, male skeleton. The perpetrator would have been smaller than the victim. He was a six-footer in life."

"I see."

"Now, as well as the cause of death," Reynolds glanced about his small office in the pathology department in the bowels of the Glasgow Royal Infirmary and again felt a longing for better, larger working facilities, "as well as that, I can tell you a number of other things. He was middle-aged when he died, fifty-five years of age, plus or minus a year."

"That's accurate."

"I took a tooth from his upper teeth and cut it in cross section—that enables us to date it within a twenty-four-month age range."

"So he was fifty-four or fifty-five or fifty-six?"

"Yes."

"When do you think he died?"

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"That's difficult to tell. Certainly it's a period measured in years. It's completely skeletal, no trace of matter on the bones at all, and that process of skeletalisation takes years. In cases like this, it's really up to the police to date the skeleton rather than the pathologist. You know, the corpse under the patio dates from the time the patio was laid, that sort of thing."

"Fair enough."

"But in this case there is nothing that I can detect which enables me to date the time of death with any degree of accuracy. It may even have been buried shallowly and have worked its way to the surface, which may explain why it was not discovered earlier."

"Possibly, but it was on a stretch of privately owned moorland where only the gamekeeper wanders. When he phoned us he said that he thought they were sheep bones, it was apparently only a matter of chance that he got close enough to see that it was a human skeleton. If he hadn't got so close, the bones would probably have remained unnoticed for several years to come."

"Lucky, or unlucky, depending on your perspective. I mean, lucky for you and the ends of justice, unlucky for the perpetrator."

"Indeed. If he or she is still with us."

"What I can do, and will do, is to remove the jaw and send it to the School of Dentistry. If you can provide a short list of names at some point, they'll match it with the dental records of those names and if there's a match, you have a positive ID."

"Thanks. We'd appreciate it."

"I'll have my report typed up and faxed to you ASAP. Noreen's not in yet. I fear that she probably had too much colourless liquid for her supper again last night."

"A lady with a problem."

"Oh, I would say so. She's close to losing her job because of it; maybe it'll take that to make her sit up and take notice of herself. I'm afraid she's killing herself. As a medical man, I can see it happening. But back to our man, that's the nuts and bolts, and my report will be with you forthwith."

"Many thanks."

"Oh, before I go, I should say that the absence of textile fibre means that he was partially clad when he was killed. No footwear came with him and shoes would have been identifiable after years of exposure to the elements. It's a further indicator of foul play."

"Again, thanks." Donoghue replaced the receiver, rekindled his pipe, and glanced out of his office window along the length of Sauchiehall Street. It was a fine early summer's day. He pulled gently on his pipe and pondered a tall man being struck from behind by a smaller person. The body was then conveyed to a moorland site. A small person couldn't carry a larger person any distance at all, so the likelihood was that some years ago, two or more people entered

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into a conspiracy to murder. The first step, as always, was to identify the corpse; then, hopefully, the rest should fall into place.

Fourteen days after Keith Stoddart had chanced across the bones on Fenwick Moor, they were identified. They were identified by dint of a computer search for the names of missing males aged between fifty and sixty years who had been reported as missing for more than two years and less than thirty. Twenty names sprang up on the flickering screen. Of those twenty, only one had the stature of the deceased. Douglas Minto was six feet tall and had been fifty-five years of age when he was reported missing twelve years ago. A comparison with his dental records and the teeth of the lower jaw of the bones confirmed his ID.

The file made interesting reading. It had all the pungent aroma of foul play, yet classically, without a body or a confession, there had been little the police could do. And, as always in such cases, time is on the side of the perpetrator; as police resources are stretched, more recently committed crimes scream for attention. The file on Douglas Minto began to sink lower and lower in the pile, and eventually it left the minds of hard-pressed officers and so ceased to be "alive" as the world continued to turn. But yet, time is not really on the side of the perpetrator, though there is perhaps that illusion. Should new evidence come to light, then the file can be accessed, it can be reopened. The case can be picked up where it was left off, unless the crime concerned is shown to have been committed more than seventy years ago: That's the cutoff point, the perpetrator by then being deemed to be deceased. But twelve years ago . . . in police terms, thought Donoghue, as he turned the dusty pages . . . in police terms, twelve years was, well . . . yesterday. Especially in the case of murder.

Douglas Minto, according to the file, was a self-made man. His wife was forty-seven when she reported his disappearance and had been his wife for twenty-five years. It appeared to be a long-term, stable relationship. A successful union. But the interested police officer at the time had recorded his suspicions about the nature of the relationship between Mrs. Minto and a young man who had been present in the house when he had called to take a follow-up statement a few days after the initial statement had been made: "...it is my impression there is something between Mrs. Minto and the young man in the house whom she described as a family friend."

Interesting, Donoghue pondered, reaching for his pipe. Very interesting.

The Mintos lived in comfortable middle-class Busby. They were childless. Sheila Minto didn't work. She was a kept woman. According to the notes, the housework was done by a maid and the gardening by a gardener, a Mrs. O'Sullivan and a Mr. Dollar

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respectively. Mrs. O'Sullivan's home address was some distance away in the sprawling Castlemilk housing scheme. Mr. Dollar's address was closer at hand, in Busby itself. Donoghue picked up the phone on his desk and tapped a four-figure internal number.

"C.I.D. DC King." A crisp, efficient voice.

"Donoghue here."

"Sir."

"Can you come to my office, please, Richard? Got a couple of jobs for you."

Self-respecting poverty. That was Richard King's first and lasting impression of Mrs. Mary O'Sullivan's flat. She revealed herself to be a portly, amiable woman in her late middle years, very house proud but also a woman of slender means. Silver-haired, she sat in an old armchair in a flat which was clean, immaculately swept, but she didn't seem to be able to run to polish or air freshener. Her television was ancient, probably a black and white set, and her furniture even older. Possibly it had been inherited from parents so, so many years ago, or else purchased from the charity shops.

"You've come to see me first?" Her voice was soft, lilting, very Irish. She had a photograph of the Pope on her mantlepiece and wound a rosary around her wrist, clinging to it like a comfort blanket.

"It's the way my boss likes to work." King returned her smile. "He likes to be on firm ground before he moves. He thinks that that is better than jumping in with both feet. And in this case, we are not under a deal of pressure."

"He's probably right." Mrs. O'Sullivan warmed to the chubby, bearded cop who sat in her living room. "There's much to be said for caution. So you're interested in Mr. and Mrs. Minto?"

"Yes. Particularly Mrs. Minto."

"Why, have you found his body?"

"Can't tell you."

"Which can only mean you have. Don't worry, son, I won't be tipping Mrs. Minto, or whatever her name is now."

"She married again?"

"Wouldn't surprise me."

"You seem not to like her?"

"I didn't. Still don't. I try not to think bad things about folk, but I didn't take to Mrs. Minto."

"Do you have any idea what happened to Mr. Minto?"

"I have no proof, but you see things if you clean in a house. It's the part of my job which is interesting. It's the people in the house. I've been a housekeeper all my days, son, no two houses are ever the same. It's what makes you stay, the people, I mean, and it's also what makes you leave."

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"So tell me about the Minto house, as you knew it?"

"A poisonous house. He was all right, Mr. Minto, a calm man, unnatural that. He was self-made but had a calmness about him which I've always associated with professional men. Other self-made men I've cleaned for all seem to have been angry, bitter, they're driven, driving themselves hard. Mr. Minto had the manner of a doctor, but he'd made his money at a string of clothing shops."

"What was she like?"

"Feisty. A wee feisty woman. I've heard that there is a chemistry which works between large, calm, biddable men and feisty wee women and I suppose that is what made their marriage work. But it was one of the households which made me pleased I never remarried. My husband was killed when he was young, we were not long married."

"I'm sorry."

"I never wanted another man. I was happy on my own. The Minto household made me realise how the two golden years I had as a marriage were better than the twenty-odd they had. I couldn't live with that woman, but like I said, he seemed to be able to. Are you married, son?"

"Yes. One child. A boy."

"Nice."

"So, twelve years ago? The Minto household?"

"It was my second-last job before I hung up my dusters for good. The reason that I carried on was that I didn't want to end my working days in the Minto household. So I went to do for Mr. McMillan, retired bank manager and widower."

"What made the Minto house poisonous?"

"She did, at all times, but especially from the day she let the young man in the house, and his Landrover parked in the driveway."

"She let a young man in the house?"

"Practically. She was in her forties, he was a student in his twenties. Clean-cut, handsome, slim. He'd be in the house when Mr. Minto was at work. I was supposed to dust and clean and vacuum and not realise what was going on."

"But you knew?"

"Of course I knew. It made it difficult for me. I liked Mr. Minto. He'd pay me each week and there was always this voice inside me saying 'your wife . . . your wife . . . ' but I could never say anything, but I couldn't stay either so I went to do for Mr. McMillan. I wasn't surprised when Mr. Minto disappeared. He didn't disappear, she did away with him and put his body under the cellar steps."

"Under the cellar steps?"

"Well, isn't that where you put your dead bodies?"

King raised an eyebrow.

"The police searched the house, they questioned me. I was with

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Mr. McMillan by then, but I'd only left the Minto home a day or two earlier so I was questioned. But I couldn't tell them anything. I said that I thought, but only thought, that Mrs. Minto had a thing going with the young man and Mrs. Minto, for all that she was a feisty wee thing, knew how to keep her head. Maybe the police should have questioned the young man a bit more—he wasn't as hard-nosed as she was. He would have cracked."

"You think so?"

"Cleaning women work with people as much as anyone. A cleaner sees how a house functions. Don't see a cleaner as just a woman fussing over the brass. She's a woman with eyes and ears."

"What do you know of the young man?"

"Durham, David Durham was his name, but you'll have a record of that."

"We do."

"He was a student. Wanted to be a schoolteacher. Pleasant lad by his manner, but what he was doing behind Mr. Minto's back made him unpleasant, and Mrs. Minto, looking so smug and pleased with herself. It was then that in the middle of polishing I just downed tools and left."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"It was not until later that I realised what was different." Ian Dollar had the healthy leathering skin of a countryman. He stood outside of his office, over the door of which was a sign which read Dollar's Garden Centre. "I left the Minto house more or less the same time that Mrs. O'Sullivan left. Just after her, in fact, but for pretty much the same reason. I just didn't like the household. I didn't like Mrs. Minto messing about with her fancy man behind Mr. Minto's back and her attitude . . . I mean, not bothering what me and Mrs. O'Sullivan thought, or even at all concerned that we knew what was happening. The attitude that the hired hands don't matter, not really human beings, just robots doing tasks that they've been set to do. That attitude belongs to another age, and we're well shot of it. But above that, more than that, Mr. and Mrs. Minto were 'new' money, they'd come up from the housing schemes. They're the last people that should treat people like that. . . . He was all right, but, see, her . . ."

"So you left?"

"Well, Mrs. O'Sullivan showed me the way. She left to have a pleasant final job to retire from. Me, I was a youngish lad, late twenties. I left to do what I've always wanted, start a garden centre."

King looked around him. "You've done all right."

"It's fairly stable now. Didn't realise the amount of work it would involve, but I stuck it and now I'm into profit."

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"So, tell me what you noticed to be different."

"The pickaxe handle in the potting shed. About the time that Mr. Minto disappeared. It had been moved and wiped clean."

"Really?" King saw the significance.

"Yes. I assume you've found his body, hence the interest."

"You can assume what you wish to assume. Tell me about the pickaxe handle."

"Well . . . confess I like your caution . . . well, the pickaxe handle stood in the potting shed, never used, just stood there, painted black, thick end on the ground, thinner end up against the wall. Remained like that for years gathering dust. I went into the shed shortly after Mr. Minto had disappeared and I noticed that the handle was gleaming black, as though it had been washed clean, and that it had been inverted. I didn't see the significance at the time, if there is any significance at all."

"I think there is a significance. Tell me, who had access to the potting shed?"

"Just myself and Mr. and Mrs. Minto."

"Do you think the handle will still be there?"

"Who can tell? The potting shed is behind the garage. All you need to do is look."

Mrs. Minto was still Mrs. Minto. She swayed as she looked at Richard King and the two constables who had accompanied him to her house. A woman well fallen from grace, thought King, two-bottle-a-day merchant at least. It was, by then, three P.M. and she was already "well on." She looked at King with bleary eyes and then leered as if fancying him as her new young lover. Her home seemed to King to be a rambling mess, the pile of unwashed dishes in the sink, the smell of stale tobacco, the garden overgrown.

"Can't keep staff," she slurred.

"We have found your husband's body, Mrs. Minto."

She seemed momentarily sobered, then seemed to look ill, and then she recovered.

"He did it, then?"

"Who . . . ?"

"Durham, Mr. David Durham . . . bold boy David, the boy-wonder lover. He did it."

"Mr. Durham?"

"Head of physics at Partick Academy, last I heard. No time for old Sheila now. Left old Sheila to the bottle. He was my boy . . . my young man."

"I'll have to ask you to accompany us to the police station, Mrs. Minto."

"To where?"

"To the police station."

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"Am I under arrest?"

"Yes. Yes, you are. After a night in the cells and plenty of non-alcoholic liquid, we'll have a chat with you and tell you why you've been arrested, and perhaps you could throw a bit of light on the circumstances surrounding your husband's disappearance. If not his murder."

"Murder . . ." Mrs. Minto croaked the word as she was led gently towards the waiting police vehicle. She walked calmly, as if in a dream. Richard King closed the door of the house, knowing that it would later be searched, though he doubted anything of value to the police would be found after twelve years. He walked into the garden and opened the door of the potting shed. The lock opened stiffly, and the door opened and let out a draught of musty air. There, leaning against the wall, was the pickaxe handle, thin end on the ground, just as Ian Dollar had described. Now dusty again, it had last been used to cave in the skull of Douglas Minto. King closed the door of the shed, leaving the pickaxe handle where it stood. He would draw the attention of the Scene of Crimes officer to the handle, but for now it was better left untouched. He glanced at his watch. The city's schools would be coming out. He drove to Partick Academy.

"Sense of relief." David Durham was a man in his early thirties. He laid the pile of exercise books on the bonnet of a Landrover in the school car park.

King had waited in the school car park. He noticed a Landrover amid the other cars. He watched as men and women carrying briefcases or piles of books got into their respective cars. When a male teacher approached the Landrover, King walked up to him and said, "Mr. Durham?"

"I've ruined my life," Durham said.

King nodded.

"Yet I feel a sense of relief."

"People often say that."

"Do they?"

"Oh yes . . ." King nodded.

"I want a favour of you."

"I doubt . . ."

"Hear me out."

"All right."

"I want to go home. I want to tell my wife. I want to hold my son."

"I can understand that."

"You're a family man?"

"Yes."

"I was stupid to get involved with her. She was a bad woman. I was young. I thrilled to it. It was fun to have an affair with an older, married woman who lived in a lavish home. I suppose you've

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seen her home?"

"Yes. Doubt that you'd recognise it now."

"I know what you mean. I happened to drive past it the other week."

"So, what happened twelve years ago?"

"She killed him. Evil little woman. She told me she'd murdered him. Crept up behind him and whacked him over the head with a pickaxe handle, right there in her living room. The woman who cleaned for her had walked out and she took the opportunity to kill her husband. Nobody else in the house, you see, except me. The guy who tended the garden never entered the house. He was lying there when I called round, still in his dressing gown. . . . She was pushy . . . insistent. . . . Just assumed that I'd go along with her. Before I knew what I was doing, I was loading the body into the Landrover. . . . I just love these vehicles. . . . This is not the one, I had an earlier model at the time."

"That's how you got the body up to the tops?"

"Yes. It's the only way. A Landrover could handle that slope. . . . A Landrover can go up a one in two. . . . The route we took up the tops was about one in six. We did it at night. We took it to a part of the moor she knew to be in private hands. She said no one would find it. She was right for ten . . ."

"Twelve years. She was right for twelve years."

"So what's that, conspiracy to murder?"

"Probably not as serious as that. Conspiracy to defeat the ends of justice. The unwritten rule is that the more you help us, the lesser the charge will be. . . . But I think you're right, you won't enter a school again."

"Just put these exercise books back on my shelves. I doubt I'll be marking the third-years' homework tonight. I mean, if you'll let me?"

King nodded. "And it's 'yes' to your other request. You know where P Division Police Station is? Bottom of Sauchiehall Street? Be there by seven P.M. Otherwise we'll be obliged to arrest you in front of your wife and neighbours."

"I'll be there." ●

Donald Westlake writing as Tucker Coe

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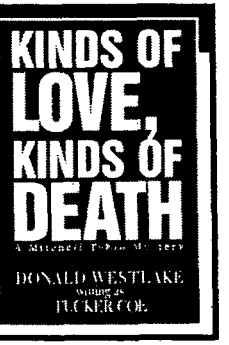

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Hank's Tale

by Dorothy Salisbury Davis

It was a grey raw day when we buried Billy Baldwin. The wind turned the women around on the church steps, tugged at their skirts, and tossed their hair. The Reverend Barnes, who'd begun to show his years, didn't seem sure of who he was talking about or when he'd died, and he was usually at his best at funerals, knowing everybody in Webbtown. But he hadn't been called to the Baldwin house till Billy was cold and some time dead. Of a heart attack, according to the coroner, who had a Doctor of Medicine degree, which I guess entitles you to work on dead people if that's your preference. He'd come from Ragapoo City, the county seat, routed out of his bed at four in the morning. Even at that he'd got there ahead of Reverend Barnes.

Although Dorothy Salisbury Davis is the creator of series detective Julie Hayes, a New York City amateur sleuth, she has mainly produced, in her fifty-year career as a crime writer, nonseries books that have less to do with detection than with the understanding of character. Ms. Davis is a grandmaster of the MWA, and as this new story shows, she can write as convincingly of rural life as she does, in the Hayes books, of New York City. †

But everything got worked out by the time of the funeral. The sheriff examined Billy's trap at Lookout Point, where he always stopped on his way home from work to pick up whatever small animal was waiting for him to put it out of its misery. There was a fair amount of trapping done in the Hills that time of year. Still is. Nancy Baldwin is famous up and down the valley for her hasenpfeffer. Never had much stomach for it myself. The sheriff brought the trap down with him. Had to spring it and break the lock. Billy was working on it, it looked like, when he slipped and tumbled halfway down the hill. It was scrambling up again and getting himself home safe, the coroner reported, that brought on the heart attack. I sure thought about those words, home safe. Dead. I asked Prouty what he thought happened. Prouty's the undertaker

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and my friend. It was in his cold room they did the autopsy. But Prouty didn't want to talk about it. In fact, nobody in the whole town did, including me.

I did pay attention to who was at the funeral and who was not. Mostly women were there. They take to funerals better than men, certainly to this one they did. Mary Toomey was sitting next to Nancy in the front pew. Big Mary sat in the front pew of most things, especially since she'd been made president of Webbtown State Bank. First woman to hold the job. Nancy looked mighty frail and kind of scared. Every once in a while she'd let out a big, wet sob that started the little one in her arms wailing. Big Mary—we'd called her that since she was a bulging-out teenager—would clamp her hand on Nancy's and you'd have thought it was a tourniquet, the way it stopped the tears for a while. If the baby didn't let up, Mary took hold of her and gave her a shake that must've cured her of everything but breathing. I'd heard it was Mary who'd called Prouty from the Baldwin place. Said she'd been with Nancy when Billy died. I guess you could call that the truth if you wanted to, and I didn't know of anyone who didn't. Across the aisle, next to the plain coffin he'd steered into the church, was Prouty, as pale as any corpse he ever got ready for a last viewing. In the next pew back were the four pallbearers Mary Toomey recruited on Nancy's behalf. I was one of them. During silent prayer I heard Mrs. Prouty clear her throat. Prouty gave a little flex to his shoulders when it happened so I assume it was Mrs. Prouty sending some kind of message he picked up. Alongside her was the pastor's wife, Faith Barnes. She sat straight and solid as a farm silo. She'd always stood for what the pastor preached, even ecumenism when it came along. It was a word most of us found hard to say, but we swallowed it. Didn't mean much except to Pastor, who tried to keep up with what was going on in the world. We're a one-church town unless you count the itinerant alleluia-sayers who show up regular and get us hollering. I mention them now because one of them was going to show up before long, though we didn't know it then.

One person who wasn't at the funeral was Clara McCracken. I might as well say now, I don't think I'd have lived as long as I have if it wasn't for Clara McCracken. I'm a lawyer, and I've practiced in Webbtown ever since I first hung my shingle upstairs of Kincaid's drugstore, some six decades ago. I don't have much of a practice left, but I've played the fiddle for pleasure all my life, and if I'm not better known for fiddling than I am for the law, I'm sure better liked for it.

McCrackens have run the Red Lantern Inn since the first of them came west after the War of Independence. One story says they were on the run from the revenue men during the Whiskey Rebellion. That sounds about right. The McCrackens almost died

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out twenty years ago, down to two sisters, Clara and Maud, maiden ladies. Maud, twice Clara's age, was determined to marry her sister to a paint salesman who put in at the Red Lantern whenever he came through the Ragapoos. Clara wanted nothing to do with him. She wanted to run wild in the hills with young Reuben White, until the day he cornered her in the sheepcote. Maudie was accidentally shot dead that day, and Clara tumbled Reuben headfirst into the well. I defended her when she was tried for murder. She wouldn't have any outside lawyer, and she wasn't much use in her own defense, taking the jury to the well and showing them how she did it. She did fifteen years.

Reuben's family didn't get much sympathy from the town. They moved away—deeper into the hills; I suppose more in shame than sorrow—when most of the townspeople drove up to the county jail to see Clara off to prison. The one member of the family, a first cousin to Reuben, who did not move away, was Mary Toomey, Big Mary.

I brought Clara home after she'd done her time, and allowed myself to be made a silent partner so she could reopen the Red Lantern. Not much business, but it's been going since.

If you wonder what all this has to do with the funeral of Billy Baldwin, I'll tell you now. I'll swear to the Almighty I saw Billy stoned—I think to death—on the veranda of the Red Lantern the night Big Mary and Nancy said he died at home after coming down from Lookout Point.

I woke up sudden that night and looked out my window. It was moonlight, cold and past midnight. A dozen or so women of the town passed under my window, silent except for their whispering feet. I knew where they were headed. There had been shenanigans, and as soon as I could get there I followed them and lay down in the hollow alongside where Billy Baldwin's car was parked. The women were standing like statues beneath the steps, tinted pink from the light of the Red Lantern sign. I heard the commotion upstairs and saw lights going on. I heard Billy yelping and scrambling down the stairs, Nancy after him, yelling and beating at him as he plunged outdoors, naked as birth and his clothes in his arms. The women blocked the steps and picked up stones from the walk which they handed round among them. Then out from a side door came Clara, wispy as a ghost in a negligee the likes of which no woman of Webbtown had ever seen before. The women stood, stones in hand, until Clara went down the steps and got one too. Billy by then was on his knees, pleading with them, and one of the women took Nancy away. Clara threw the first stone and Billy went down in the barrage that followed. Didn't move even when Clara went back up the steps and kicked him like he was a dead calf. The women picked up more stones

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and flung them at Clara. They hissed at her like snakes. When she made it into the inn I took off and never looked back.

After the funeral nobody, even at Tuttle's Bar and Grill, where most of the men hung out, ever mentioned Billy. I felt things were hanging in a kind of delicate balance, but I could've felt that way because of what I'd seen. I didn't know for a fact about Prouty or Reverend Barnes, but I was pretty sure I was the only man in town to know what really happened to Billy. It bothered me a lot at first, but after a while I got to thinking maybe I dreamt the whole thing. I sure liked it better that way.

There was a thaw in early January. It made the three-mile exit off the interstate almost impassable. I'd just come up from the town and waited on the veranda when a car and trailer pulled up in front of the Red Lantern. Both vehicles looked as though they'd had a long and hearty life. Which was more than I could say for the driver. He got out of the car and scraped his boots at the bottom step. He was tall and thin as a string bean, the eyes of a zealot, I thought. I'd seen his like among mountain preachers. His smile was practiced, on and off. His clothes were a dusty black, a topcoat that flapped open, trousers tucked into his boots. He tipped the brim of a high-crowned hat, and the first words out of his mouth were, "Are you a Christian?"

I didn't like him asking that. "I am when I have to be," I said.

But he took my words at their best value. "I'm the Reverend Isaiah Teague, but I'm not a prophet. I'm only a poor evangelist." He offered his hand and I took it. I could feel the bones.

"I'm Hank," I said, hoping it would be enough to get him on the road again. I didn't offer him the hospitality of the inn. To tell the truth, I was afraid if I let him in, I wouldn't be able to get him out, and Clara would kill me. I was glad I hadn't been too hospitable when next he asked me if I knew of a lady named Mary Toomey in the town, and where he'd find her.

I looked at my watch. "I think you can find her at this hour at the bank."

"She works at a bank?" he questioned and nodded approval.

"She's president of the First State Bank of Webbtown."

The smile came and went, and so did he.

Before he was out of sight, Clara came out to me. "What was that all about?"

"Looking for Big Mary. He's a clergyman of some sort."

"They know now where the money is," she said. Which was more or less what I'd thought of him myself.

But Mary took to him from that first day. She helped him in more ways than we knew at the time. First, she did two good turns at once by getting him room and board at Nancy Baldwin's.

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Billy hadn't left Nancy more than a rabbit's skin, and she hadn't been the same since his death. The baby, too, was sickly. It cried most nights through, according to the neighbors. That stopped whenever the reverend was there. If you listened close you could hear him sing gospel at all hours, Annie Pendergast said, as sweet as any you ever heard on the radio. He'd go off for days at a time and come back weekends. He was laying out a summer tour of the campsites, it was told, and on one return when he stopped first at the bank, Big Mary came out and climbed into that woebegone vehicle of his and rode with him past the inn and up over Lookout Point. You had to say his attitude toward Mary was gallant, not exactly bowing and scraping, but so respectful it could turn your stomach. We didn't begrudge her such attention, you understand. I suppose we even pitied her, the way you would anybody you thought was being taken advantage of.

What happened to me that winter was that Tom Kincaid sold the drugstore to a chain company, and the first thing a chain company does is renovate. Clara suggested I move my office into the first-floor parlor of the inn. Pointed out it had a separate entrance. After hemming and hawing and looking her straight in the eye to see if I could tell what was going on with her, I agreed. I knew that was the door Clara had come out of in the negligee. But I also knew that moving my office into the Red Lantern, I might help spread a little goodwill where it was needed most. Clara didn't go into town much, just for what shopping she had to do, and some of that she shunted onto me. The women were cold toward her, crossed the street when they saw her coming, things like that. She never was sociable. Loving people didn't come natural to her. She'd learned a lot in prison, but not about loving.

The day after I moved my office in, she was watching me put things away where I could find them. She was being lazy, which was unusual for Clara. I put my violin case on the top of the shelves for my law books. I never played it at home. Too lonesome.

"Fiddle us up a tune," Clara said.

"I'm getting terrible arthritic," I told her, but I got the fiddle out and tuned it. I don't get asked so often anymore.

Clara, sitting half off, half on the side of my desk, the sunlight playing round in her hair, looked prettier than I'd seen her since she went to prison. Not a bit like her sister Maudie, who I'd thought she was getting to resemble more every day.

"Anything special you got in mind, Clara? You know my repertoire."

She grinned at me and gave her nose a crinkle. "How about a lullaby, Old Hank?"

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It was going on ten o'clock when I got a call from Clara. She wasn't feeling so good and wanted me to take over the desk. I asked her if she didn't want me to get in touch with a doctor for her. I hadn't mentioned it till then. She hadn't either. Now she exploded.

"What in hell for? Go to bed, Hank. You're getting to be a nag, a nanny. You're more old maid than I am."

I guess that was the truth. There was a storm coming sure, that dead quiet when even the crickets stop to listen. They're better forecasters than radio or television, closer to home. I still live in the house I was born in, and going out, I locked the door. I wasn't sure when I'd get back.

Clara was sitting in the lobby, sweating and bubbling gas. Like I'd thought, all eight room keys were hanging in a row. Nobody was coming off the interstate that night. Webbtown wasn't even on the interstate, three miles from the nearest exit.

"I'm going upstairs now," she said, and lifted herself out of the chair, real careful. Didn't show much, but she was a big woman, and a heck of a lot stronger than I was.

"I could fix that storeroom off the kitchen for you, Clara. I could set up a bed in there. You'd be more comfortable."

"Think so, Hank?" Real sarcastic.

She went up the stairs one creaky step at a time. From the landing she called down to me, "Better fire up the hot water. Feels like we're going to need it soon."

No point in going into details here, but my first trip upstairs she warned me if I tried to call a doctor she'd get up and pull the hall phone clear out of the wall. When she got to moaning and twisting the brass rungs of the bedstead, I couldn't take any more of it. I started out of the room and said I'd come back soon.

"You better, Old Hank. I did fifteen years on account of you."

You don't take serious what people say to you at a time like that, but I sure felt it.

"I didn't mean to say that ever. It's this ornery little son of a bitch inside me trying to get out."

I just nodded and went on, but I'd been standing there long enough to notice that fancy negligee draped over the chair like somebody invisible was sitting in it.

The wind was rattling shutters like they were castanets when I got downstairs. The telephone operator got the county hospital for me, but there wasn't anything they could do if I didn't bring her in, baby and all if it got born on the way. The one doctor on duty was already in the delivery room. They'd try to hold him till we got there. I knew I could get a mountain to Mohammed a lot easier.

I called Faith Barnes, the pastor's wife. Pastor was having an asthma attack. This weather brought it on every time and she wasn't going to leave him. "Are you sure it's a baby, Hank?"

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I just asked her who she thought I could call.

"I can do that much for you. I'll try and find someone willing to go up there. People are scared of her. And now this . . . She's got to be near fifty years old."

I'm not much for quoting Scripture, but I said to think of John the Baptist's mother, how old she was when he was born.

"She at least had a husband," Faith said and hung up.

The phone was crackling and the lights flickered whenever there was a big gust of wind. I got two hurricane lamps and a couple of farm lanterns from the storeroom. I'll say this for Clara, they were on the ready, chimneys clean, wicks trimmed, and a big can of kerosene with a funnel. I took one of the lamps upstairs with me in a hurry. When she was quiet it was almost worse than when she was hollering. She looked like something done up for Halloween, her hair in strings, her eyes popping, her face in a kind of green sweat.

"It's recess time," she said, "unless he's got himself tied up in there. Come here, Hank." She took my hand and put it where she wanted it over her nightgown. "Feel anything?"

I did feel a tiny pulse. It could have been my own, but I said yes. I could feel her heart pumping like an oiler.

She let go my hand and groped for the brass rungs behind her head. "Here he comes again, the little bulldozer."

I suppose I was thinking, What if it's a girl? but what I said was, "Who is he, Clara?"

"Jeremiah McCracken."

The wind kept whistling at the window, and Clara howling every time the pains hit her. She told me to bring up two buckets to haul water from the bathroom and told me where to find more towels. I was to bring the kitchen scissors she used to cut up chickens. The light hanging over the bed would swing and stay off longer every time. I put the kitchen matches by the hurricane lamp, and what flashed through my mind was when my mother was dying and I came home from law school. She went so quiet when I got there. That was over sixty years ago, and it was just as though it happened yesterday.

Clara went quiet and stared at me like she was listening with her eyes. "There's someone in the house."

"I'll go see," I said.

"You stay here. I got pa's shotgun under the bed." And at the top of her lungs she shouted, "Get out! Whoever's there, get out!"

The lights went down again and then went off. I'd left a lantern burning on the desk below, and now through the bedroom doorway I could see its wavering light move up the stairs. When the electric light came on again there was Big Mary Toomey already in the room.

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"Hank, get her out of here! You hear me, Mary Toomey, I don't want you here."

"I'm not asking for hospitality. I'm doing my Christian duty. Hank, we need more light. I don't care where you get it. Get it now." She put what looked like a tool kit on the commode and untied it. It was medical instruments. I knew the midwife in town, but it wasn't Big Mary.

Clara kept tossing her head and biting back crying out. I did everything Big Mary told me to. She was a born top sergeant. I'd been in the army long enough to know one when I saw one. When I'd done what she told me, she sent me downstairs and told me to stay there till she called me. Then I was to come running.

I sat in the lobby and wished the wind was louder so I wouldn't have to hear Clara giving birth. I tried to think about Big Mary and how she'd battered her way to the top job in the bank. Nobody thought she'd make it, and she wasn't going to do it by women's wiles, so you had to give her credit for hard work and taking correspondence courses. And now this business of the traveling preacher—she gave us a real surprise. You had to wonder which of them had the other in the palm of their hand. I'd have thought Mary Toomey was the last person Faith Barnes would send to Clara—and maybe she was, nobody else willing. And Big Mary practicing Christian charity on Clara? I couldn't believe that.

I didn't even notice when the storm died down. I must've fallen asleep. I woke up sudden to what I thought was crows, first birds up in the morning. It was dawn, and what I was hearing was Jeremiah. The next I heard was a terrible squabble between the women. When I got upstairs both of them were pulling at the baby, him wrapped in a towel and sputtering like he'd choke. The tiniest, reddest thing I ever seen alive.

"She's trying to kill my baby! Hank, take him away from her!"

Mary left Clara with the towel and held the creature by the feet, bare as a plucked chicken. She whacked him until he was crying again. Then she put him in a clean towel and handed him to me. I saw for sure he was a male child.

"You better get him baptized soon," Mary said. "I don't think he's going to last long."

"He'll make it," Clara said. "He's a McCracken." She was trying to get to the side of the bed.

"Can't be more than half McCracken, can he?" Big Mary said. She was packing up the instruments, dipping them in the bucket of water first and drying them on whatever she found to do it with. When she'd tied the strap, she stood, hands on her hips, and looked down at Clara. "Why don't you let me have him, Clara? I'll raise him in a decent Christian house. I won't say where I got

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him. Sent away to the Indian reservation—I could say that. Looks kind of like one. Old Hank won't tell what happened here tonight."

"Shut up! Just shut your rotten mouth." Clara was sitting up by then and getting her feet over the edge of the bed. I knew she was aiming to get hold of the gun.

I put the baby in her arms and pushed her back in bed. He kept her busy for the minute. "You better go now, Mary," I said. "Folks'll be out and around cleaning up. You did a good deed, but no point advertising it, if you want my opinion."

"Mind who you're talking to, Old Hank. I'm running Webbtown these days, didn't you notice?"

"You're doing a fine job," I said. Pure babble. I got her out the bedroom door and closed it. Clara lay back on her pillow, with that little red body making sucking noises. His mother knew what to do about it. When I went round the room, trying to tidy up where I could, I knew I should be fixing coffee and oatmeal. But being me, I had to neaten things up a bit first. That's how I noticed Big Mary'd used the negligee to wipe up the instruments on. I just took it down the stairs with me and put it in the furnace.

Jeremiah got more human-looking every day. He sure knew where his next meal was coming from. Clara was up and doing in a day or two. She spent a lot of time filling in and scratching out the Sears catalogue order forms. You could almost hear the silence come up from the town. People drove by without looking our way. I could be standing out on the veranda and nobody seemed to notice. Even at Tuttle's they didn't ask if there was a baby at the Red Lantern. You'd expect that, but it was another thing they didn't want to know. A couple of big boxes of baby things were delivered by the Pendergast twins, who said Miss Toomey sent them. Clara hid in the storeroom with the baby until the kids were gone. When I told her where they'd come from, she said to burn them. "Pour kerosene over them and put a match to it."

I told her not to be a darn fool. He was going to puke and pee in them anyway. I did some threatening and we had words you didn't hear from me very often, but she gave in. Didn't have anything herself to put him in but swaddles. She called the county nurse a couple of times, and when Jeremiah was two weeks old, I drove them both to the clinic in Ragapoo City. Clara wanted to drive—she always did—and me to hold the baby, but I wasn't ready to be seen in public doing that. They gave her such good marks at the clinic she thought she wouldn't need to go there anymore. I figured that was why they gave her such good marks.

Fall came on as beautiful as I'd ever seen it. The rain from that summer storm had something to do with it. Or just having a child around made a difference in how things looked. Some of the same

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harvesters came through as last year and didn't mind too much going down to Tuttle's for their main meal. Just so they could come up and finish off with the beer we still called Maudie's Own. I kept looking at one and another of them and at Clara, just wondering. Nobody but Clara would count on a one-night stand to make a baby. I knew now, if I ever doubted it, she wanted him bad.

If I'd been paying less attention to Jeremiah those days, I'd have known better what was going on in the town. I heard that Reverend Teague had taken his trailer on a camp tour that summer, and then parked it by River Junction where he preached from a platform that was part of the old county fairgrounds. Prouty and Mrs. Prouty and some others went to hear him, watched a couple of baptisms. They thought he was pretty good. He knew the Bible a lot better than they did. But most of them thought they'd stick with Pastor Barnes. Big Mary went up and gave him a few amens, and he came down now and then for a meal at her house or Faith's, but he wasn't living there anymore. And when he walked in town with Mary, he wasn't just sidling along with her the way he did at first. He walked with his back straight and he always wore his hat and was sure to take it off to anyone they met. He'd turn and smile to those who didn't stop, even if it meant showing his back to Mary. Mary was as proud and patient with him as if he was a child. When I heard this, what went through my mind, in and out, mind you, was her asking Clara to give Jeremiah to her. I never thought it was a serious proposition, just something she said to rile Clara. But where did it come from? Anyway, like Nora Kincaid said, Isaiah Teague was beginning to feel his oats.

Halloween passed with nothing worse happening at the inn than the rain barrel being toppled. I was rolling it back into its place when Reverend Teague drove up, parked, tried to help me, and was no help at all. He followed me into my office. "I hear you have a baby here in need of baptizing."

"That's something you'll have to take up with his mother," I said.

"I've never met Miss McCracken," he said.

"Well, why don't you go around and introduce yourself? She'll know who you are."

"A friend of Mary Toomey's." He cleared his throat. He'd said something that could be taken for a joke.

"I'd just ask her about getting the baby baptized," I said.

Isaiah quick-smiled at me. "She'll never know, unless you're the one to tell her—I was with Miss Mary when the call came from your parson's wife. I persuaded Mary to come and help. I'd have come myself but Mary said she might become violent, seeing a man. But I've delivered a baby or two in my time."

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"That a fact?" I said. I knew now where Big Mary got the instruments she'd brought along. He'd softened me up a little, telling me. But why tell me, except he wanted me to tell Clara? I didn't like him much better than the first time I'd laid eyes on him. "I'll take you round and introduce you. Then you're on your own."

I gave Clara ten minutes at most to send this tent-Christian on his way. Two hours later, when I went in from my office, there he was in the lobby, rocking Jeremiah in his basket and mumbling, sing-song, something like, "You're going to be a Christian boy." Jeremiah was burbling with pleasure.

Clara was almost as perky as her son. "Hank, we're going to have another christening. Remember the last one?"

I tried to remember if there'd been one in the last forty or so years.

"I don't remember it either," Clara made fun of me. "It was me, Old Hank, and you played the fiddle. You're going to be the godfather, aren't you, Hank?"

I knew I was too old to be anybody's godfather for it to do him much good while he was growing up, but I didn't like the way Jeremiah took to Reverend Teague. "I guess I can handle it," I said.

After Teague was gone and she'd quieted Jeremiah down, I said to her, "You know Big Mary's gone kind of sweet on him, don't you?" I always took whatever news I could of the town up to her, and I might have had in mind to dampen her interest in him by mentioning Big Mary. But it was about as foolish a notion as I ever had. You could've said her smile was angelic if you didn't know how much wickedness was in her. "We got a parson of our own in Webbtown," I snapped. "It ain't right trusting Jeremiah's christening to an outsider."

"Something I learned when I was away, Old Hank: It don't matter who dishes it up, it's what's on the plate that counts."

I left her to manage her own doggone inn and her own doggone baby, closed up my office, and went down to Tuttle's. I hadn't been there much lately. Prouty and Tom Kincaid were resting their elbows on the bar.

Tuttle drew me what used to be my usual, said it was on the house, hospitality to a stranger. It wasn't as good as Maudie's Own, but I sure liked drinking in their company. I took a long pull before I even said, "Thank you." Then, like I had a chip on my shoulder, I said, "You know we got a baby up at the Red Lantern."

"Congratulations, Hank, you old son of a gun," Kincaid said.

Not much of a laugh from the other two. It ought to have come off funnier than it did. But then they'd have had to forget that it was in this very room they'd all chipped in to send Billy Baldwin up to proposition Clara: They were so doggone sure she was running a house and maybe coaxing doves from among their women. So now you know why no one was talking about Billy Baldwin.

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Maybe I was the only man to know how he died, but every married man in town had a hunch why.

"The visiting preacher came by today, looking to do a baptism," I said. "And I guess there's going to be one. I put in a word with her for Pastor Barnes, but the evangelist got to her first. Don't know what's wrong with Barnes. Isn't it his job to gather in the lambs?"

"He's about to retire, Hank," the barkeep said. "That's what we were talking about when you walked in."

"He's getting kind of old," Prouty said.

"I know what's old and what isn't," I said. "When's this going to happen?"

"Soon as we get a replacement. He's going East. Him and Faith's got a son out there and grandchildren they've never even seen."

"And this Isaiah Teague—what kind of a name is that anyway?—he's first in line. Is that what's happening?"

"Big Mary's been working on it," Tuttle said.

"Tell me something I couldn't guess. Is she running the church now too? Ain't the bank enough for her?"

"Take it easy," Tuttle said. "You'll get your say when the time comes."

"Looks to me the time's already past." I was getting myself madder all the time. "Prouty, you know what's going on with the church. Is this all her doing?"

"She petitioned the Convention, him being a different kind of Baptist. They're going to meet on it first of the year."

"Hold on one damn minute," I said. "I've supported the Webbtown church for over sixty years. What's this petition you're talking about? Who all signed it? I thought we were a congregation, not a Holy Roman Empire."

Finally Prouty admitted, "Mrs. Prouty signed for both of us, signed it Mr. and Mrs."

"And you let her do it?"

"Well, she didn't exactly ask me. You've not been around much lately, Hank. There's some who like him. They think he's a good man."

"And a good man's hard to find," I said, sour.

"'Specially when he's still alive," Prouty said, and pushed over his glass to Tuttle for a refill.

I went straight home from Tuttle's instead of going back to the inn and relieving Clara. I was spending a lot more time at the Red Lantern than I was in my own house. I could write down a phone number in the dust on my hall table. I knew there was a lot of bluster in what I had said at Tuttle's. My edgy feeling about the situation had to do with how Clara felt about Big Mary, and me telling her how Big Mary felt about Teague. Even so, when I went up the next day and she asked what was doing at Tuttle's—she

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knew by instinct that's where I went—I had to tell her about Pastor Barnes quitting and Teague lining up for the job. She'd have found out anyway.

You could have heard her cackle all the way to the interstate. "Queen Mary! Rattling the gates of heaven, ain't that right, Hank?"

I hadn't even mentioned the petition business. I didn't say anything. I watched Jeremiah pee straight up in the air.

"Ain't he a devil?" Clara said, busting with pride. "I hate to put a dappy on him."

Sure enough, the following Sunday, Reverend Barnes announced he was going to retire in early spring. Retirement isn't something we go in for voluntary in the Hills, but he was trembly again and Faith said at coffee hour, they wanted to spend time with the grandchildren while they were still children. Nobody asked what they were going to live on—or off—but everybody wondered. I wasn't at church myself. I'm not regular, but I'm dependable when they need me. And when I heard that Parson had invited his friend, Reverend Isaiah Teague, to preach the next Sunday, I made up my mind to be there.

Reverend Teague preached as though he wanted to make us feel good about ourselves, and I must say that hit me just right. He told us about the Campbellite roots of our denomination and the pioneer spirit that brought them west and settled this evangelical Christian group in the Ragapoo Hills. We'd almost forgotten that. And I could see what he'd meant with that "Are you a Christian?" introduction. There was a time that's what we were called, just plain "Christians." I felt foolish for what I'd said back to him about being one when I needed to be.

"I don't mind listening to sinners," he said at one point in the sermon. "That's what I'm here for. But like Jesus himself, sometimes I'd like to hear about these transgressions over a good meal. And by transgressions, I don't mean fibs and nickel-and-dime meannesses. I want something I can get my teeth into before the devil gets there ahead of me."

It went something like that, and I could see he was going to get several Sunday dinner invitations. Might even get "the Call" if we came to a vote on it. I thought I might have made a mistake measuring him on my early impression. And then there was the way Jeremiah and him took to one another.

Clara couldn't wait for me to come up to the Red Lantern to tell her about it. I told her what I could remember. She was disappointed, expecting hellfire and brimstone. "Where was Big Mary in all this?"

"She was there in her pew. And pouring coffee afterwards, come to think of it."

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"Pouring coffee, la-de-da." She'd seen that on the television, but I didn't say so.

"She was kind of holding back. She'd done what she could for him, getting the petition to the convention," I said.

"And pushing poor old Barnes off the cliff."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"I know human nature better than you do, Old Hank."

She'd ought to, I thought, having all that time to think about what she'd done to Reuben. And to poor Billy. Then she said the craziest thing: "I don't think she could have a baby, do you?"

I wasn't going to answer that one.

She pouted for a minute or two. Then: "Hank, you know where he's living now. He's got his trailer on the fairgrounds by River Junction. People come miles to him for real baptisms. I want you to drive over there and arrange Jeremiah's before the weather gets any colder."

"You mean you're going to let him plop your baby like a duck egg in the river?"

"It's called immersion, baptism by immersion, and I want him done right."

"Then get yourself another godfather. I ain't going to stand out there and get pneumonia." Which wasn't what I meant to say at all.

"Hank, just go over and let him show you how he does it. Real quick and into a warm blanket. All the praying's done ahead of time."

I guess I don't have to tell you, I went to see Isaiah Teague just as I was told to, and the next Tuesday, after all the school buses had driven by the junction, Jeremiah Henry McCracken was dipped into a Monongahela inlet and came up Christian, smiling.

We went back to the Red Lantern and fired up the furnace. A couple of oil inspectors were signing in that night. Phoned to make reservations, which tickled Clara. The Ritz. Isaiah stopped on his way into town and I brought the bottle of Old Kentuck from the back bar into the kitchen. I made hot toddies for Clara and me, and Clara put a drop of watered whiskey on the tongue of Jeremiah.

"Me, too," Isaiah said, which sure made us laugh.

But Clara took a tablespoonful and poured it into his mouth, forcing him to open up. "Hank, you won't tell Big Mary, will you?" she said, a spark in her eye.

"I wish you hadn't said that," Isaiah said. "I'm supposed to be a peacemaker."

"I say what's on my mind and do what I have to do."

"We must have a discussion about that some day, Miss Clara."

"Hank, go get your fiddle."

Isaiah looked at his watch. It was getting on toward noon, but he didn't say anything. I noticed from my office window he'd parked his

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aging vehicle right alongside mine at the back of the inn. You wouldn't notice it just driving by. Nothing could stop me from remembering—in and out of mind again—where Billy Baldwin parked his car the night of the stones. I'd wondered which woman drove it home, with him in it, Nancy or Big Mary. It had to've been Mary who transported him. Nancy was falling-down frail that night.

It was Big Mary herself who asked me to head a committee to make a farewell purse for Parson Barnes. She came out to where I was at the cashier's window in the bank and invited me into her office. It was plain but tidy—some rubbery plants and a picture of her father, one of those paintings a traveling artist paints from a Brownie snapshot. I guess you'd say it was a lady's office, but the smell of cigar smoke was going to last till they tore the building down.

I protested that the only way I could raise money was with my violin and a tin cup on a Saturday night. But she got her way with flattery and a first contribution. It wasn't diplomatic of me—in fact, it was kind of sly—when I asked her if there was any word yet from the Convention on how Reverend Teague stood with them.

"Better than you'd think, Hank, but they feel they have to make conditions." She was blushing like a schoolgirl. She gave a funny little toss of her head, as though maybe she had a fly on her nose. "We'll just have to wait and find out."

I realized I was seeing Big Mary in love, and I was as embarrassed as she was. I thought one of those conditions would want the parson to be a family man and she was working on it. I was trying not to say anything like that, so I said something worse, meaning money for the retirement purse: "I'll be doing my best, Mary, but you can't get blood from a stone."

We could've choked on the silence.

"Good old Hank," she said then and gave me a cold smile. She ought to have known I wasn't smart enough to make that insinuation on purpose. But what she'd be pretty sure of now was that I knew what the women did that night, and how her and Faith had got Billy home where they could say he died in his own bed.

What made Christmas special that year was Jeremiah. There hadn't been a tree at the Red Lantern since before Clara went away. She wanted to know if I thought he'd understand if we got one for him. I said we'd be lucky if he paid it attention at all, and I told her about the Christmas I remembered most. I'd have been five years old. My folks didn't have much money, and what Ma and I did, we went out in the woods back of where we lived, picked out a tree, and made Pa come and chop it down. I told Clara the whole story, how we stuck it in a bucket of coal and decorated it with pictures of toys and bicycles and sleds we cut out of the Sears

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Roebuck catalogue. I'll be darned if she didn't make me do the same thing and herself got out the Sears catalogue and cut it up. They don't make catalogues like they used to, but Jeremiah didn't know that, and he kind of liked the whole celebration.

On Christmas Eve, a dozen or so youngsters with Isaiah leading them, and Anne Pendergast, Mrs. Prouty, and Faith Barnes a kind of rear guard against defections, came up from the town and sang carols below the Red Lantern sign. I stood out on the veranda and waved my hands like I was directing them. I wanted to take Jeremiah out, but Clara said no and took him into the storeroom again till they were gone.

There wasn't going to be a better time to ask Clara a question that'd been nagging at me since Jeremiah's arrival, so I just blurted it out. "What are you going to tell him when he starts asking about not having a father like other kids?"

"I'm going to tell him about a hunting accident," she said, and got a dreamy look in her eyes. "It was way up north in Canada, bear country, during a terrible blizzard. His pa was hurt bad and his partner went looking for help. Got somebody, but they got lost on their way back and couldn't find him. They looked and looked and they called and called, and all they could hear back was their own voices. They never found him. All they found was bear tracks in the snow. Ain't that beautiful, Hank?"

I figured there was no point in reminding her about bears hibernating in the winter.

By Groundhog Day, no word had come from the Convention. Faith Barnes, who was trying to pack up a lifetime, invited Isaiah to board with her and Pastor for the last months of winter, but he said no, but thank you kindly. He called the trailer his hermitage, said the solitary life was good for him. He stopped by most times he came to town, pinched Jeremiah's toes and talked real soft to Clara. Left her a Bible I never caught her looking at, but maybe she did. Even a good baby gets tiresome when you don't know what he's saying back to you.

I did better than I thought I would collecting a retirement purse for Reverend Barnes, and we decided to give it to him early so him and Faith would know what they could count on. Easter was coming mid April that year and we decided that was when we'd hold the party for them. Nobody was pushing things except maybe Big Mary. Most of us, even me by that time, didn't see why Convention had to make a theological issue of it, if that's what was happening. After all, Pastor had preached ecumenism to us and it could be stretched to fit. But Isaiah himself was for due process, as he put it to me, the lawyer.

It was Clara, squinting into the early dark, noticed Big Mary going by most nights when the snow was cleared, driving up past Lookout

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Point. If I was behind the bar, Clara'd call out—whether I had a customer or not—"There she goes!" An hour or two later, Mary'd come down again. Clara was clocking her. I wasn't. She figured Mary was taking him up a warm supper and looking for a little cuddling. I thought it'd be easier to cuddle with a giraffe, but I didn't say so.

Spring always comes if you believe in it. The cardinal's song was almost musical, the willow trees were getting yellower, and Isaiah Teague took to dropping by the inn late of an evening—well after Big Mary had come down from whatever she'd gone up for. We included customers if there were any, me fiddling and the reverend singing out the words of hymns we'd heard since childhood. Now and then I'd lapse into country, and once Clara picked up her skirts and skipped into a solo performance of the Virginia Reel. I remembered how she first got into trouble dancing wild with Reuben. The switch Maudie took to drive him out with was still in a corner of the bar. Sometimes Isaiah would tell us what it was like preaching and singing gospel and when he got carried away with the message, dancing for God. He showed us a step or two and you could tell he'd been a real prancer in his youth. Clara made bold to ask him right out if he didn't have a wife and kids somewhere. He gave her that quick smile I'd almost forgotten and said, "Don't you have a husband somewhere?"

Mind, all this congeniality didn't go on for very long. The days were getting longer and I thought it a miracle Big Mary hadn't walked in on us. I don't suppose I'll ever know how she'd've taken to it. She was a blood relative of Reuben White, and he was a live one. Alive, that is. I had a little legal business I could only put my mind to after Jeremiah was laid down for the night, and I must've missed the stories Isaiah told of preaching on the open road, stories that went to work on Clara's imagination. She asked me once if I'd ever known of any women evangelists, and I told her what I could remember hearing about Aimee Semple McPherson. She was even before my time.

I don't like to say it had anything to do with April Fool's Day, but on the first Sunday in April, Pastor announced he had a letter to read us from Convention. I was in church because of a meeting afterwards of the retirement committee. There was a rumble of satisfaction at the dispensation they granted us to hire the Reverend Isaiah Teague. Isaiah sat up there alongside Pastor, stiff and straight, and kept that come-and-go smile under control, though I could see a twitch getting loose now and then. What Pastor didn't read out was the Convention's consideration that Reverend Teague expected to marry soon. The word got out almost as soon as if he'd read it. I guess we all knew who we thought leaked it, but we didn't say so. We just congratulated Isaiah on coming through and thanked Mary Toomey for getting the petition to Convention

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in the first place. But it set me to wondering what else Pastor had kept from us over the years. I was thinking of how late he was called that night to Billy Baldwin's and how he kind of groped his way through Billy's funeral. And then I thought of how natural he took to the idea of retiring. If it was me, I thought—after all those years of ministering—I'd've straightened my back, spit in the wind, and stayed till they carried me out. It was as though he had something on his conscience he'd not been able to hand over to the Lord. It made me feel guilty, and then when I thought how much money people had come up with for the retirement gift, I was pretty sure a lot of Webbtown folk felt the same way I did.

I dreaded telling Clara the news, thinking how it meant an end to those cosy evening visits from Isaiah. We'd never talked to one another about why he came. We'd made fun of Big Mary's courtship—I guess you'd call it that—never believing for a minute—I know I didn't—that she'd win.

"Won't make any difference," Clara said. "He ain't going to abandon us, Hank. We'll just be his hermitage and she won't ever know."

"Clara, this ain't New York City or Paris, France." Where I'd been once after the war. The very idea of him coming up to us, a married man, made me feel guilty, even though there was nothing sinful in those visits. That I knew about anyway.

"I know what it's like to be in prison, Hank. That's what Maudie wanted to marry me into—and what I had fifteen years of when the only green I ever saw was when I stood on the toilet and looked out the window. He's a wild bird, Hank. Big Mary's crazy if she thinks she can keep him in a cage."

I felt the same. I didn't know what was coming, and I didn't want to know.

Isaiah was to preach the morning of the retirement party. He invited Clara to attend, even threatened to come and get her himself if she didn't come with me. I was of two minds, at least two minds, knowing how unpredictable Clara was, but thinking it'd be as good a time as any to introduce Jeremiah to the congregation, since he was already a Christian boy. When Clara said they'd be there, I went up to Ragapoo City and bought him a nice outfit out of my own pocket. Clara let me. She had money since the state bought a section of McCracken land, but she was saving every penny now for Jeremiah. I was nervous helping get him dressed on Sunday morning, even more when Clara came down wearing a dress I hadn't seen for over fifteen years. It was black and fit her snug and just the way she wore it at her trial; she had a red handkerchief at her throat.

The ones in church ahead of us fell silent when we were ushered down near the sanctuary, Clara holding Jeremiah out in front of her like he was a little king. I don't remember much about myself,

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except that I was wearing my good suit.

When Isaiah stepped up to the pulpit, he was carrying a bundle of letters. He made a little bow toward Pastor, who sat in his usual place aside so the pulpit didn't block him from the congregation's view, and said he had in hand the tributes of a grateful parish, which he'd present to Pastor by and by. I guess he said how grateful he was to all of us for promising to call him, and I know he did mention Mary Toomey by name. She was on the other side of the aisle from us. I saw heads turning her way, but I didn't look and Clara didn't look, I don't think even at Jeremiah, just straight at Isaiah.

Then he told us what brought him to Webbtown.

He'd been preaching in a town he'd never heard of in the mountains to the south, and a woman stood up and told him of her terrible pain—she'd lost a son to murder and his name was Reuben White. Isaiah told us how he was able to help her and her family heal a wound festering a whole generation. They didn't expect any peace in this world unless they got revenge. That's what they lived for. I think this is what he said: "With God's help I persuaded her family, one by one, to bring their anger to Jesus, and their suffering, and let go of their bitterness." And I know he said this: "Shall I tell you the Lord's message to me? He told me there was healing to be done in the town they moved away from, a whole town that needed healing but needed first to tell its sins and sorrow." He preached for maybe an hour, straight out of the Bible, things we'd never heard just that way before. Even Jeremiah seemed to listen. Clara seemed dead alive, if you know what I mean, frozen.

But he wound up thanking us again and saying he was going to preach this coming week at River Junction, starting a new tour. "I thought I had the makings of a pastor," he said, "but I'm only an evangelist trying to make straight the way of the Lord."

The party went on, but neither Clara nor Big Mary stayed for it. It turned out to be a pretty good welcome to Parson Barnes, asking him and Faith to unpack.

I went back after taking Clara and Jeremiah home. The only thing Clara said that I remember, "I ain't going up to River Junction." She kept saying it now and then for the next day or so.

Finally I said, "Well, maybe River Junction will come down to you."

"Better not," she said, and then brightened up. "It won't be coming down to Big Mary, will it?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't like that "Better not."

Then as I was going home that night, and I hadn't been home much lately—home was getting to be where Jeremiah was and maybe needing me—as I was going out the door she called me back. "I want you to take Pa's shotgun with you, Hank. And you'd better hide it somewhere good in case I ever ask for it back." ●

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BLOOD IN THE WATER

by Janice Law

Vern Lanyon had always said that he knew only two things, boats and babes. Though babes had sometimes created trouble, boats had done okay by him. He owned a nice yacht brokerage and a busy Connecticut marina which appreciated in value when the Pequots went shopping for shore-front property. Pretty soon Vern had a waterside condo, a really nice Bertram 54 dubbed *Lively Lady,* a Lexus in his garage, and lots of five-figure credit-card bills. The rise in his net wealth was so steep that Vern began to think himself rich enough for politics.

Author of nearly a dozen mystery novels, historical novels, and many short stories, Janice Law is also an academic, and is therefore able to pursue fiction writing only in her spare time. Ms. Law's work has included ventures into science fiction, but she always returns to the mystery field, where she continues to write about the series character she launched in 1975, Anna Peters. The following tale is a nonseries work with an ironic twist.

His mistake in this happy situation was venturing too far from his base of knowledge. Vern sank more money than he should have in a hedge fund and then some more into a "sure thing" currency speculation. The currency deal got killed when the Thais blocked conversion of the *baht* in the Asian financial crisis, and the hedge was hit when the market turned bullish against all reason.

One morning Vern woke up to find himself not just overextended and temporarily embarrassed, but in a major cash-flow crisis. To put it bluntly, he was broke. That's when he thought of Sandy.

Not that he didn't often think of Sandy, who was a genuine babe: tall, slim, and nicely assembled, with beautiful cornsilk hair and brown eyes. Smart girl, too, a legal secretary with a good firm, but a babe just the same. Sandy's hobby was the theater, and seeing her perform planted the idea which blossomed out of Vern's cash-flow nightmare.

Wakening to disaster, he remembered the play. The venue was

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nothing fancy, just a school auditorium with friends, family, senior citizens, and high-school drama students corralled to see *The House of Bernardo Alba.* Vern, personally, had gone prepared for the worst, but he agreed to attend because he liked Sandy. She was a big girl who looked good in cutoffs and a windbreaker; a woman who belonged up on deck in bright weather with her hair blowing round her face. Vern could almost get romantic about Sandy—or, at least, about the look of Sandy.

So, there he was, being a good guy and swelling the crowd, when she walked on stage: black lace, collar to her chin, skirt to the floor, talking fancy talk as this Spanish spinster, a Spanish virgin, for God's sake. What was astonishing to Vern was that she was completely believable. Completely. She'd become someone else.

He was impressed at the time, but though he recognized an unsuspected talent, that's all he saw. Protected by a good cash flow and a favorable position in the market, Vern had been safe from ideas. When calamity changed that, one thought blew up like a mushroom cloud. At first, of course, he dismissed it, put it aside, recognized the lunacy of it. But the idea lingered around the edges of his mind, teasing and pestering him with the hope of a solution, until one night he broached the subject to Sandy.

They were at the Oyster House, a marble, mahogany, and cellphones bistro with the best clam chowder south of Boston. The Lexus was gone, and the bank owned the condo, but as long as he had plastic, Vern intended to eat well. "I got a proposition for you," he said.

She made a small, salacious joke and they both laughed.

"Not that kind of proposition."

"Is there any other kind?" she asked. Sandy had acquired the cynical edge romantics get when they're disappointed in love. She'd spent five of her prime years on an affair with a handsome Coast Guard officer who was married with three children.

"This proposition is all business," Vern said.

"I thought this was a date." She pursed her lips and her brown eyes darkened. Sandy was ready to be serious about someone. She wanted a house and a garden and small children. It troubled her sometimes that Vern might be her last really good chance.

"It is, it is a date. An important date." Vern took her hand. Though he'd always believed that Sandy was more attached to him than he was to her, he would have to exert himself now. "Every date with you is important," he said.

She watched him, bright-eyed, playful but alert. In his nervous state, Vern was picking up on all sorts of irritating and distracting vibrations. He was going to have to be careful.

"So," she said.

"So, listen, you know my situation at the moment. 'A vulnerable

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position in the market' is how my broker puts it. Temporary, of course, strictly temporary, but worrisome at this moment, with the way things are between us." He looked at her eyes and hoped that was the right note.

"How are things between us?" Sandy asked. The thing with legal secretaries is that they're inclined to cross the t's and dot the i's, especially ones like Sandy who'd had their hearts in pieces.

"Interesting and becoming serious," Vern said. He thought he could say that safely, suspecting, as he did, that Sandy hadn't quite gotten over the man she used to see. She'd mentioned him one night after a few too many margaritas. Sandy had gone on about how she wanted to make a "fresh start."

Not that Vern had paid much attention. All he remembered was that it had been a heavy, serious affair and that the man was married. A classic babe situation was Vern's diagnosis.

"We're becoming serious, right?" he repeated.

"I'd like to think so," said Sandy. "But I didn't think you were ready to settle down."

The very words "settle down" iced Vern's stomach. "Sometimes you need a reversal to let you see what's really important," he said. "You know what I mean? You get too many toys, you don't always see the essentials."

Sandy inclined her head in agreement.

"The hell of it is, now that I see what I want in life, I've got this major cash-flow problem. Way things are going, I don't look able to settle down, as it were, for another decade."

Sandy took his hand sympathetically. "You're a smart guy," she said, "and I make a good living. Between the two of us . . ."

"Sandy, darling," he kissed her hand, "I couldn't do that to you. I'm under a whole landfill of debt." He described his follies in the market, the horrors of selling short in a rising Dow, and then, when he had discouraged her pretty thoroughly, he presented his idea.

"You see, at this point, I might be worth more dead than alive."

"Vern!"

"Listen a minute. I've still got *Lively Lady*—haven't been able to sell her for what I paid for her. If I were . . . well, say I was to be lost out in the Sound. With the insurance on the boat and my personal life policy—you hear what I'm saying? I'm seeing a kind of nest egg for us." Emphasis on "us." "And risk free. I mean, I wouldn't have to be anywhere near the water. Not if someone convincing was to put the alarm in to the Coast Guard. That's the key, someone convincing. Someone like you who can really act up a storm."

Sandy didn't say anything for moment, but, of course, she knew the legal ramifications. Vern was just beginning to worry when she asked, "Who's the beneficiary?"

"Why you, of course. It would have to be you."

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"How new's the policy?"

"I don't have it yet. I didn't think I needed a big insurance policy. I wasn't going to disappear at sea when I had everything going great, was I?"

In his irritation, Vern let his voice rise just a little.

Sandy shook her head with what seemed to be regret. "Too big a coincidence. It's got fraud written all over it."

She didn't seem shocked, just practical. Vern could see the problems, but now that he'd actually voiced the idea, he hated to give it up. Before he could reconsider, he heard himself say, "It would be all right if we were engaged. If we were engaged, the policy would make plenty sense."

"Are we engaged?" she asked.

Vern hesitated for a fraction of a second. He wasn't eager to risk his freedom, but he could see from her eyes that nothing less would do. "I'd like that," he said.

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes, yes, I mean it," said Vern, who thought that he was becoming a pretty good actor, himself.

She smiled then, the big, open smile he liked so much. "Well, all right," she said.

Vern kissed her hand.

"But I'll need a ring. It won't be plausible without a ring."

"We need a major ring!" Vern did enjoy shopping. "We'll hit Lux Bond and Green tomorrow. Maybe a party, too?"

"Yes," she said, then, "No. No party. Not if you're going to disappear. I'd feel that I was deceiving my family. You know."

This tenderness of conscience made Vern uneasy. "But they'll have to know. I mean, before we do it."

"Oh, sure. Nearer the time I'll tell them. It's just that it will be hard. You'll disappear and be lost, and they'll feel bad and I'll always have to be pretending. Acting."

"You're such a terrific actress," Vern murmured.

When Sandy shrugged and looked sad, it passed through his mind that he had never met her family, the family who would grieve for his loss. He was marrying a woman unknown in certain essential aspects. But then Vern reminded himself that at this stage, their marriage itself was still hypothetical. Once they got hold of the money, things could change, might change, would have to change. "Sure, wait till we get the ring and have everything set." He raised his glass. "To insurance," he said, and immediately thought that he should have said, "To us."

But Sandy smiled. "To the depths of the sea," she replied.

The next day, Vern began to put his plans in motion. Fortunately, with running a marina and selling yachts, he had acquired useful

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contacts. Guys who pay cash for fast boats and sail them into the wee hours have esoteric knowledge: like where to get a new identity cheapest and the easiest way to leave the good old U. S. of A. and emerge with a new name and new papers in our friendly big neighbor to the north. Stuff like that.

In the busyness of these preparations, Vern buried the rest of his reservations and scruples. If it worried him once in a while to be relying so much on Sandy, well, he reminded himself that she adored him. Besides, he was going to be a new person, too, with new possibilities, no debts, and a very nice chunk of money. He told himself that he could make this scheme work, absolutely.

When everything was ready, Vern rehearsed the plans with Sandy, who listened without making any comment. When he was done, she remarked, "I've told my mother we're engaged."

"Good," said Vern.

"She was pleased," Sandy said, "after—you know." She meant, of course, the Coast Guard officer, that mysterious married hunk whose name, occupation, and identity Vern had forgotten—if he'd ever known them.

"Sure. That's great." Considering her melancholy expression, Vern wondered if Sandy might rethink their marriage, though probably that was wishful thinking. "This will work. Everything will be fine." He took her hand. "And listen, there's a storm front coming in end of the week. Is that perfect?"

Sandy gave a little half-smile. "I guess," she said.

The front arrived Thursday, right on schedule, and, at first, blew up such wind that Vern was worried the Sound would be too rough. It wouldn't do to look suicidal with a million-dollar policy at stake. Eight hours later, the storm had begun to track east northeast, and the high winds lightened, leaving cloud and rough water behind. Vern called Sandy and alerted his friend Norm, who had a nice little boat shed up on a very small, quiet creek.

This boat shed was the ultimate destination of *Lively Lady,* and once she was safely moored, Vern took his phony papers and his newly dyed hair and got himself first to Montreal and hence to Quebec City. There he switched on the motel cable and watched a big green and yellow blob devour the East Coast.

Some poor sucker in a rain parka was doing a standup on the Rhode Island shore. Rain spotted the camera lens and sluiced down his face as he went on about gale-force winds and thirty-foot seas. The storm had changed track at the very last minute. Couldn't have been better for *Lively Lady*'s disappearance, thought Vern. Couldn't have been better.

A couple of hours later, he tuned in again to the news that a fishing boat out of Nantucket had capsized, a surfer had drowned off Newport, and a private yacht was overdue out of Stonington.

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The seas were so brutal even the Coast Guard boats were having trouble. It would be no surprise at all if a boat like *Lively Lady* were lost forever.

This was absolutely perfect, and in his excitement Vern called Sandy early. He let the phone ring twice, hung up, called again, let it ring three times, hung up, and waited for her to go to the convenience store pay phone and call him back.

He went through this routine a dozen times over the next three days before he finally got the call. In the meantime, waiting dulled his excitement and sharpened a latent vein of anxiety.

"Vern?" She sounded tired and upset. "Vern?"

"Victor, darling. Please remember not to call me Vern."

A silence. Ominous.

"Is everything okay? We couldn't have asked for more from the storm. A boat can sink in a blow like that and never be found. Perfecto, eh?"

"Ideal," Sandy said, but her voice had a strange, flat, shocked quality as if all the electricity had gone out of the line.

"So what's the problem? Insurance will be in your face, sure, but you've just got to be tough. They're not going to have the ghost of a complaint."

"It's more than that," Sandy said, and Vern could hear tears. "One of the rescue ships got into trouble. They lost a man and another was hurt. I was on the beach that afternoon. I was the one who told them you were out. It's all so bad, Vern."

"Well, shit, Sandy, that's tough, but don't take it personally. I mean, they'd have been out anyway, wouldn't they? It's their job to be out. Fishing boats, windsails, yachts, surfers. I'm sure it wasn't just *Lively Lady* on the water."

"You didn't see the waves. I told them you were lost, and a lot of extra people went out, and now everyone's angry," she said. "The police say they're going to look into your finances. They don't really believe—"

"Listen," said Vern firmly, "they're paid to be suspicious."

Silence.

"Of course you're upset. Of course you are." And thank God for that, Vern thought. Upset was good. Plausible, believable. As long as Sandy didn't go overboard on the guilt thing. "If you weren't upset, it would look pretty funny, wouldn't it?" Vern went on in this vein as the silence got longer and longer. "They can't touch you," he said. "Keep your mouth shut and they can't touch you. There's not the slightest proof. You want us to get married, don't you? You want us to get the money?"

Finally Sandy stopped sniffling and agreed to these propositions. Vern hung up feeling only semi-nervous, but it was late August, four full months, before Sandy called again. By that time,

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Vern was working at a marina along the St. Lawrence and beginning to worry about getting himself to a warm-water port. Then one night the phone rang, and when he lifted the receiver, he heard the sound of traffic in the background. Instantly, he could smell the exhaust from the Clam Shack and diesel fuel and late-summer heat on tarmac: the convenience store parking lot, Sandy on the phone, insurance.

"We've done it, haven't we?" asked Vern.

"Yes," said Sandy.

"We've really done it!" he exclaimed and whooped over the line like an Apache. On the other end, Sandy was quiet, but Vern did not notice.

"I need to see you," she said when he had congratulated her, exclaimed about their good fortune, credited his own brilliance. There were things to straighten out, Sandy said, fiscal manipulations and complications, a new account in the Bahamas, other details. She was precise and organized, all business. Vern would be best not to return to the States, certainly not to Connecticut. Especially not by boat. Sandy was very explicit about that. "Don't even think about it," she said.

In his euphoria, all this was minor stuff. "Hey," Vern said, "I've got to take a boat down to Nassau next week, and I'm supposed to pick up another crewman. How about it? A little holiday for you. Fly to Quebec, we sail to the islands. It's an easy trip. Get our cash and we're on our way permanently, baby."

Sandy said something about her job.

"This is a new life," Vern said. "After all that's happened, you need to get away, to make a fresh start. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Sandy, but her voice was odd. "Yes, I wanted to make a fresh start." She began to cry.

"I know it's been tough," said Vern. "It's been tough for me, too." He'd been lonely in Quebec, he told her. He couldn't wait to see her.

She arrived by plane a week later, thinner and paler than he remembered, her eyes hidden behind sunglasses. She had five thousand dollars in cash with her, which was helpful, and from the way Vern felt himself relax when she stepped through the doors at the gate, he realized he had been half afraid she might not come. She could have cashed that big check and lost his phone number. She could have, but, fortunately, there she was. Gorgeous as ever in a white summer dress and a red jacket, still in love with him, and set to make a fresh start as his wife. Vern put the latter thought aside and swept her into his arms.

There was a moment's awkwardness, then she laughed at his hair—bleached blond—and his full beard and his French sailor's shirt.

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"You wouldn't have recognized me, would you?" he asked when he put on the wire-rimmed aviator glasses he'd affected.

"Not at first glance," she admitted.

"So there's nothing to worry about. Vern Lanyon's dead, gone, and forgotten."

Sandy nodded, agreeable to the death of Vern Lanyon, to the trip, to everything he suggested. Vern felt how foolish he'd been to worry. And really, who wouldn't like the boat, a big, handsome Hatteras, beautifully fitted, that was being run down to its new owner in the islands? Vern had everything prepared in anticipation of her arrival, and they left at dawn the next morning, cruising into the cool, golden light of the seaway. All down the Canadian coast, they slept on board, remaining on the water except to put in for gas and food.

Vern was a touch nervous when they reached the States, but in the mass of late-summer yachtsmen, no one gave them a second glance. Just the same, Vern was pleased with his preparations, with the success of his disguise, with the foresight which had obtained papers for Sandy, too. "It's your ultimate role," he joked. "A completely new life."

"For how long?" she asked.

"Long as you like," he said.

"And then take on another life, maybe," she said. "When we're tired of this one."

Vern decided she was teasing and passed the remark off with a smile. But she'd suggested a possibility. Oh, Sandy was fine. Easy to take, good with the boat. There's nothing wrong with Sandy, Vern told himself a couple of times a day. Of course, she was quieter than before. She didn't make the little dirty jokes she used to make. And she liked to sit on deck at night, staring at the white wake of the boat.

There were other things, too, if Vern had troubled himself to count them up, like the day they stopped at Cape May, and Sandy disappeared for twelve hours. Just disappeared without even her wallet and seemed surprised when he questioned her, when he was concerned. She'd gone for a walk, she said, and perhaps she had, because Vern saw no sign of Coast Guard boats or police. Only his nervousness had magnified her absence, which was an odd thing, sure, but not quite enough to make a reasonable man worry.

Especially not when they were sliding down the edge of the continent towards a fortune. The days took on a heavier warmth, losing the bright crispness of the north in languid humidity. The sea warmed up enough so that they could swim even out from shore, and they got in the habit of taking a dip every afternoon. Some-

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times they saw dolphins and one day, off Fort Lauderdale, the black fin of a shark.

"Nothing to worry about," Vern said. "They come for blood. Otherwise they're really not that dangerous."

Sandy got out of the water anyway, and lay sunbathing on deck, her eyes sweeping the water. When he was finished swimming, Vern sat beside her on the warm boards and talked about what he wanted to do, about the kind of boat he'd like to buy, about the possibility of starting a charter business in the islands. "I'm going to stick to what I know from now on."

Sandy was noncommittal. She was already finding the endless, hot, blue-and-gold days oppressive, and she could not see herself crewing a boat or whipping up meals in a galley kitchen for the paying customers.

"I can't go back," Vern said. "You said so yourself. Not for a few years anyway. Got to get myself established in a new business in my new identity. That's the key."

"And what about me?"

"You've just got a big insurance settlement. What's more natural than that you should invest your money? Buy into a company, say? It just needs to be something I understand, like boats. I understand boats just fine."

"I was thinking on a personal level," Sandy said. Her voice was quiet, uninflected. There were disquieting moments when Vern remembered how she'd looked on stage as that vindictive Spanish virgin and sensed that she was now giving a slightly imperfect performance.

He shrugged. "We get married, of course, if that's what you want." That was, Vern thought, the easiest way to divvy up the money.

"Or maybe a different life?" Sandy suggested.

"Sure, maybe a different life. We divide the money, you have a different life if you want."

"Or if you want," said Sandy, and they proceeded to quarrel without really saying what they thought—or maybe without really knowing what was in their minds. They were not, after all, the same people anymore.

That night, Sandy sat up on deck in the early dark for a long time. Later, preparing some vegetables in the galley, her knife slipped and she cut her hand. Blood mingled with the cubed carrots and celery, the garlic and tomatoes, and spotted the blond maple counter. Vern grabbed a dish towel. He was wrapping her hand up and putting pressure on the shallow, fast-bleeding wound when he realized that she hadn't made a sound, hadn't moved. She was watching the blood with the detached, concentrated expression of a surveillance camera.

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"Hey," said Vern, grabbing her shoulder. "You're not going to faint, are you?"

Sandy's eyes came back into focus. "Sight of blood," she said. "I've never done that before. Ouch, what a stupid thing to do." She gave the old Sandy smile, and Vern got some Band-Aids and relaxed.

The weather held—Vern thought he had never seen such perfect conditions for cruising—and they reached Freeport on schedule. Sandy was sick of fish and wanted to find a butcher shop. Vern had in mind to do some banking; he wanted to transfer some money, to begin pulling down that big new account, but she said, "Let's wait until we look at some boats, at something big." There was a nervous, enthusiastic note in her voice. "Just like you wanted."

And Vern, knowing that was safest, agreed. He worked around the boat, putting everything in order, while Sandy set off to find a steak. She returned two hours later, hot and tired, with a large package.

"You bought the whole cow?" asked Vern.

"A steak and a surprise," said Sandy, and she packed everything away in the galley refrigerator.

The following day, heading toward Berry Island, they stopped in the channel to swim. They'd gotten fond of isolation, of the vast blue-green open water, of the great depths below. Vern liked to dive straight down as far as breath would take him, then rocket back up on the edge of fear. The water was very clear, and once in a while, they would see the white of a sail or a hull on the edge of the horizon.

Vern shook the brine out of his eyes and looked for Sandy far out from the boat—she was a strong swimmer. He saw only empty water and the gentle roll of the waves. He turned, isolation and a thousand little hints and feelings breeding alarm, to see her starting up the ladder of the boat.

He waved and she called back, "I've taken a cramp."

"Need some help?"

"I'll be fine as soon as I get out of the water." She reached the deck and began massaging her left calf.

Vern ducked under the surface, the sudden cold of the lower water washing away his anxiety. There's nothing wrong with Sandy, he reminded himself before he struck out for the horizon with his flashy crawl. Vern was fast, but not good for any distance. He was ready to turn back when he heard the rumble of the motor, and the pleasant frisson of the deep turned into something else.

He shouted to Sandy, then swam briskly toward the hull. Sandy was standing at the helm in her floppy hat, her eyes hidden by the brim and by her sunglasses. She could be anyone, Vern thought, but he was an optimist, so he called again and waved to the woman who adored him. The boat hung suspended in the emerald water with nothing wrong at all except for the sound of the motor.

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Vern swam into the shadow of the hull. She had lifted the ladder, but he could perhaps scramble up the side.

"Sandy!"

She looked down at him, her face blank, indifferent, her voice steady and uninflected. "I did for you. And what did it get me?"

Vern was indignant. "It got you well over a million dollars!"

"He was killed," Sandy cried, her voice turning hoarse and strange, a stranger's voice, carrying a stranger's inexplicable passions.

"Who?" demanded Vern. "Who are you talking about?" In his present distress, he had forgotten Sandy's former lover. Vern's only thought was that she'd had a breakdown, taken some sort of fit.

"The only man I ever, ever loved."

"You're going to marry me. I thought you loved me," Vern protested, but Sandy ignored him.

"How was I to know he'd be on that cutter?" A wail of grief and desolation. "How was I to know? Of all the boats, out of all the Coast Guard bases! How was I to guess?"

"Christ, Sandy, you couldn't know," said Vern, who was wondering how any of this was *his* fault. If she couldn't keep track of what's his name, how was he, Vern, supposed to? The whole situation was bizarre, nonsensical, and he was tired of treading water. But when he tried to reach the stern, Sandy eased the boat away and brought it around again. Sandy could handle the Hatteras very nicely.

"I wouldn't have done it except for you," she said. "It was not the sort of thing I'd ever have thought of. The seas were terrible, but I insisted they go, because my fiancé was out. My fiancé," she added bitterly, "who wants the money and the single life. Don't deny it!"

In the water and beginning to gasp for breath, Vern thought it best to remain silent, though a preference for the bachelor life is hardly a capital offense.

"They were hit by a huge wave. He was slammed against the rail and hurt and swept overboard."

"No one's fault," Vern gasped. "No one's fault." And then he asked her to let him come aboard. She needed help, he said. She'd had a bad shock, how bad he hadn't realized. He should have realized. She should have told him. But now he knew, and they could work something out.

Sandy shook her head. "I loved him," she said. "I wanted to get away from him, but I loved him. You didn't know I was still seeing him, did you? I was, I was. But after a while all I wanted was to start fresh."

Vern pleaded with her and tried to distract her as he paddled about. The water felt cool, almost cold, in the shadow of the hull. Above him, Sandy didn't answer; she held her head stiffly, as if she was wearing an old-fashioned, high-collared dress.

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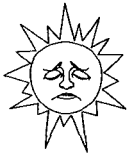
At last, Vern risked everything. "Listen," he said, "there are yachts passing all the time. When I get picked up, Sandy, and I will get picked up, what will you say?"

In response, she lifted a dark red plastic bag like a lumpy balloon. Before he could cry out, Vern saw the flash of the boat knife. Liquid spurted onto the water, making soft, red fans.

"I'll tell them sharks came while we were swimming," said Sandy. Her voice had gone dead, dead and uninflected, as if Vern was of no concern to her. "I know how to act. I know what to say. I've had practice with a dead fiancé."

She threw the plastic bag into the water and put the motor into gear. Vern shouted once, twice. Then he began splashing after her, churning through the wake, exerting all his strength, because, though he'd never catch up, he could already see the fins. O



Summer Parole

by Katherine H. Brooks

What hostile frame of mind embraces
This row of sulky little faces,
Resembling so a prison lineup,
that no suggested sport will shine up?

Like listless cons, who hate restrictions
that counteract their own convictions,
They find no purpose left, attractive,
to keep their grubby fingers active.

As once they did, before arraignment,
they case the joint for entertainment,
And, finding none, revert to creatures
with wild, distorted twisted features.

In restless fits, the inmates rumble
from mood of either rough and tumble,
To screams sufficiently demented
to keep a lion tamer tented.

I cannot hang them by the thumbs,
and thus my warden's role becomes
A race involving Hari-Kari
and sweet approaching solitary.

Stir-crazy children, on vacation,
while Mother, Keeper of Probation,
Implores the Heavens strength to give 'er
till Autumn sends them up the river.

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NEXT ISSUE...

Eight Lives
BY SUSAN DUNLAP

The Prank
BY ROBIN HATHAWAY

Missing in Action
BY PETER ROBINSON

The Summer People
BY BRENDAN DUBOIS

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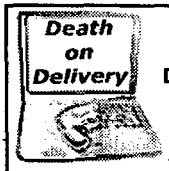

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